

I CAUGHT THE ATTENTION
OF A MONSTER.



GOD OF MALICE

LEGACY OF GODS

RINA KENT

GOD OF MALICE

LEGACY OF GODS SERIES BOOK 1

RINA KENT

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To the ones whose type is an unapologetic villain.

AUTHOR NOTE

Hello reader friend,

If you haven't read my books before, you might not know this, but I write darker stories that can be upsetting and disturbing. My books and main characters aren't for the faint of heart.

Killian Carson, the main character of *God of Malice* is a true psychopath, not a make-believe, nor a bad boy who's eventually tamed. He's a villain with very questionable actions, so if you can't handle morally black characters, please do NOT proceed.

This book contains non-con, dub-con, and suicidal thoughts. I trust you know your triggers before you proceed.

God of Malice is a complete STANDALONE.

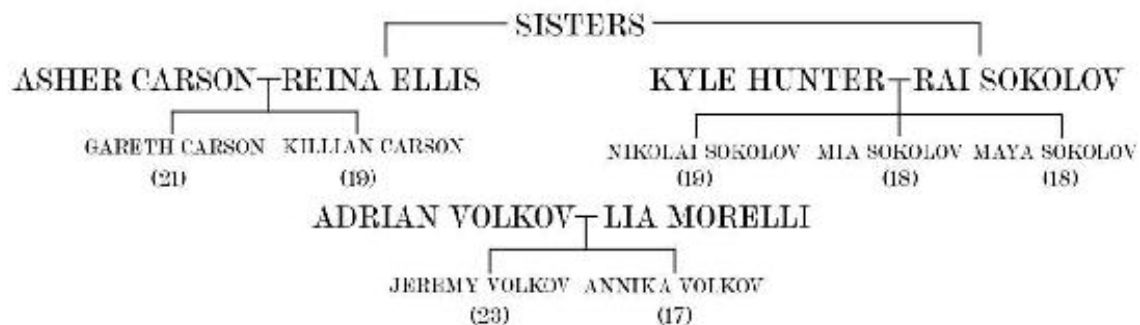
For more things Rina Kent, visit www.rinakent.com

LEGACY OF GODS TREE

ROYAL ELITE UNIVERSITY



THE KING'S U'S COLLEGE



BLURB

I caught the attention of a monster.

I didn't ask for it.

Didn't even see it coming.

But the moment I do, it's too late.

Killian Carson is a predator wrapped in sophisticated charm.

He's cold-blooded, manipulative, and savage.

The worst part is that no one sees his devil side.

I do.

And that will cost me everything.

I run, but the thing about monsters?

They always chase.

PLAYLIST

The Wolf in Your Darkest Room – Matthew Mayfield
Family – Badflower
Rehab – Weathers
Fourth of July – Sufjan Stevens
Heartless – The Weekend
Devil Side – Foxes
You and I - PVRIS
Who Are You – SVRCINA
Villains – Mainland
Mercy – Hurts
Heathens – Twenty One Pilots
Who's in Control – Set it Off
Fireflies – Owl City
Alone in a Room (Acoustic Version) – Asking Alexandria
Man or a Monster – Sam Tinnesz & Zayde Wolf

You can find the complete playlist on [Spotify](#).

GLYNDON

Disasters start on black nights.

Starless, soulless, sparkless nights.

The type of nights that serve as ominous backgrounds in folklore tales.

I peer down on the crashing waves that war with the huge pointy rocks that form the cliff.

My feet tremble on the edge as bloody images roll in my mind with the wrecking force of a hurricane. The replay happens in full, disturbing motion. The rev of the engine, the slide of the car, and eventually, the haunting scratch of metal against rocks and the splash in the deadly water.

There's no car now, no person inside it, no soul to be dispersed into the unapologetic air.

It's only the slam of the angry waves and the ferocity of the solid rocks.

Still, I don't dare to blink.

I didn't blink back then either. I just stared and stared, then shrieked like a haunted mythical creature.

He didn't hear me, though. The boy whose body and soul are no longer with us.

The boy who struggled both mentally and emotionally but still managed to be there for me.

A sudden chill runs down my back, and I cross my flannel jacket over my white top and denim shorts. But it's not the coldness that rattles me to the bone.

It's the night.

The terror of the merciless waves.

The atmosphere is eerily similar to a few weeks ago when Devlin drove me to this cliff on Brighton Island. An island that's situated an hour by ferry on the south coast of the United Kingdom.

When we first came here, I never imagined everything would spiral to a deathly end.

No stars were present then either, and just like tonight, the moon shone brightly, like the bleeding of pure silver on a blank canvas. The immortal rocks are unassuming witnesses of crimson blood, lost life—and an all-encompassing sense of grief.

They all say it'll get better with time. My parents, my grandparents, my therapist.

But it's only been getting worse.

Every night for weeks, I haven't gotten more than two hours of hazy, nightmare-riddled sleep. Every time I close my eyes, Devlin's kind face comes crashing in, then he smiles as scarlet red explodes from all of his orifices.

I wake up shaking, crying, and hiding in my pillow so that no one thinks I've gone whacko.

Or that I need more therapy.

I was supposed to spend Easter break with my family back in London, but I just couldn't take it anymore.

It was pure impulse when I snuck out of the house as soon as everyone fell asleep, drove for two hours, took the ferry for another hour, and ended up here past two a.m.

Sometimes, I want to stop hiding from everyone, myself included. Oftentimes, however, it gets too hard and it's impossible to breathe properly.

I can't look Mum in the eye and lie. I can't face Dad and Grandpa and pretend I'm their little girl anymore.

I think the Glyndon King they raised for nineteen years perished with Devlin a few weeks ago. And I can't face the fact that they'll learn that soon.

That they'll look at my face and see an imposter.

A disgrace to the King name.

It's why I'm here—a last attempt to expel the charge building in my body.

The air frizzles my honey-colored hair that's streaked with natural blonde balayage and stuffs it in my eyes. I flip it back and rub my palm on the side of my shorts as I stare down.

Down.

Down...

My rubbing heightens in intensity and so does the sound of the wind and the waves in my ear.

The pebbles crush under my tennis shoes as I take a step closer to the edge. The first one is the hardest, but then it's like I'm floating on air.

My arms open wide and I close my eyes. As if I'm possessed by an alternate power, I don't recognize that I remain standing in place or how my fingers itch to spray paint on something.

Anything.

I hope Mum won't see the last painting I did.

I hope she won't remember me as the least talented of her kids. The disgrace who couldn't even reach the tip of her genius.

The weirdo whose artistic sense is screwed up in all the wrong ways.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper the words I think Devlin told me before he flew to nowhere.

Light slips past the corner of my closed lids and I startle, thinking that maybe his ghost has risen from the water and is coming after me.

He'll tell me the words he snarled in every nightmare. "You're a coward, Glyn. Always were and always will be."

That thought spurs those images from the nightmares. I spin around so fast, my right foot slips, and I shriek as I tumble back.

Back...

Toward the deadly cliff.

A strong hand wraps around my wrist and tugs with a force that steals the breath from my lungs.

My hair flies behind me in a symphony of chaos, but my vision still zeroes in on the person holding me effortlessly with one hand. He doesn't pull me from the edge, though, and instead, keeps me at a dangerous angle that could get me killed in a fraction of a second.

My legs shake, slipping against the tiny rocks and sharpening the angle I'm standing at—and the possibility of a fall.

The person's eyes—a man, judging by his muscular frame—are covered by a camera that's slung around his neck. Once again, blinding light flashes directly on my face. So that's the reason behind the startling flash a moment ago. He's been photographing me.

It's only then I realize that moisture has gathered in my eyes, my hair is a tragic mess of the wind's making, and the dark circles beneath my eyes could probably be seen from outer space.

I'm about to tell him to pull me, because my position is literally on the edge and I'm scared that if I try to do it myself, I'll just fall.

But then something happens.

He slides the camera from his eyes, and my words get caught at the back of my throat.

Since it's night and only the moon offers any type of light, I shouldn't be able to see him so clearly. But I can. It's like I'm seated at the premiere of a film. A thriller.

Or maybe a horror.

People's eyes usually brighten with emotions, any type. Even grief makes them shine with tears, unsaid words, and irrevocable regrets.

His, however, are as dim as the night and just as dark. And the weirdest part is that they're still indistinguishable from their surroundings. If I wasn't staring straight at him, I'd think he was a creature of the wilderness.

A predator.

A monster, maybe.

His face is sharp, angular—the type that demands undivided attention, as if he were created for the purpose of luring people into a carefully-crafted trap.

No, not people.

Prey.

There's a masculine quality to his physique that can't be hidden by his black trousers and a short-sleeved T-shirt.

In the middle of this freezing spring night.

His arm muscles bulge from the material with no hint of goosebumps or discomfort, as if he were born with cold blood.

The hand he's currently holding my wrist hostage with—and effectively stopping my fall to death—is taut, but there's no sign of exertion whatsoever.

Effortless. That's the word to be used for him.

His whole demeanor drips with utter ease. It's too cool...too *blank*, so that he appears a bit bored, even.

A bit...absent, despite being right here in the flesh.

His full, symmetrical lips are set in a line as an unlit cigarette hangs from between them. Instead of looking at me, he stares at his camera, and for the first time since I noticed him, a spark of light simmers behind his irises. It's fast, fleeting, and almost imperceptible. But I catch it.

The single moment in time where his bored façade shimmers, darkens, rears from the background before eventually disappearing.

"Stunning."

I swallow the unease creeping up my throat, and it has little to do with the word he said and more to do with how he said it.

His deep voice sounds laced with honey but is actually fogged with black smoke.

It has to do with how the word vibrated from his vocal cords before rippling in the space between us with the lethality of poison.

Also, did he just speak in an American accent?

My doubts are confirmed when his eyes slide to me with deadly confidence that locks my shaking muscles. For some reason, it feels as if I shouldn't breathe the wrong way or else I'll meet my downfall sooner rather than later.

The resemblance of light has long since disappeared from his eyes and I'm face to face with that shadowy version from earlier—muted, dull, and absolutely lifeless.

"Not you. The photograph."

That sounded American.

But what would he be doing in such a desolate place that even the locals don't tread near?

His hand loosens from around my wrist and when my feet slip back, several rocks fall and meet their demise. A haunted shriek echoes in the air.

Mine.

I don't even think about it as I grab hold of his forearm with both hands.

"What the... What the hell are you doing?" I pant through my choked breaths, my heart stammering. A sense of terror rips through my rib cage, and I haven't felt anything like it in weeks.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" He still speaks with utter ease, as if he's discussing breakfast options with friends. "I'm finishing the job you started, so when you fall to your death, I can commemorate the moment. I have a feeling you'll be a good addition to my collection, but if you're not..." He shrugs. "I'll just burn it."

My mouth hangs open as an influx of thoughts invade my mind. Did he just say he'll add a picture of me falling to my death to his collection? I have too many questions, but the most important of all is, what type of collection does this lunatic keep?

No, scratch that—the ultimate question is, who the hell is this guy? He looks about my age, would be considered handsome by societal standards, and he's an outsider.

Oh, and he gives off a criminal vibe, but not the petty, ordinary kind. He's in a league of his own.

A dangerous criminal vibe.

The mastermind controlling countless thugs, who usually lurks behind the scenes.

And somehow, I happened to appear in his path.

Having lived my life surrounded by men who eat the world for breakfast, I can recognize danger.

I can also recognize people I should stay away from.

And this American stranger is the epitome of those two options.

I need to get out of here.

Now.

Despite the nerves attacking my already fragile mental state, I force myself to speak in my no-nonsense tone. "I wasn't planning to die."

He raises an eyebrow and the cigarette in his mouth twitches with a slight movement of his lips. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. So can you...pull me up?"

I could use his forearm to do that myself, but any sudden movement will probably have the exact opposite effect and he could release me to meet my maker.

Still grabbing my wrist with a nonchalant hand, he retrieves a lighter with his free one and lights the cigarette. The tip burns like rich orange dusk and he takes his time before he throws the lighter back into his pocket and blows out a cloud of smoke in my face.

I usually gag on the smell of cigarettes, but that's the least of my problems now.

"And what do I get in return for helping you?"

"My thanks?"

"I have no use for that."

My lips purse and I force myself to remain calm. "Then why did you grab hold of me in the first place?"

He taps the edge of his camera, then caresses it with the sensuality of a man touching a woman he can't stay away from.

For some reason that causes my temperature to rise.

He looks like the type who does that a lot.

Often.

And with the same intensity he exudes.

"To take a picture. So how about you finish what you started and give me the masterpiece I came here for?"

"Are you seriously saying that your masterpiece is my death?"

"Not your death, no. It'd look too bloody and displeasingly gory when your skull is smashed against the rocks below. Not to mention that the current lighting won't be able to capture a good picture. It's your fall that I'm interested in. Your pale skin will have a wonderful contrast against the water."

"You're...sick."

He lifts a shoulder and blows more toxic fog. Even the way he slides his fingers against the cigarette and smokes appears effortless, when it's shackled with tension. "Is that a no?"

"Of course it's a no, you psycho. You think I'd die just so you can take a picture?"

"A masterpiece, not a picture. And you don't really have a choice. If I decide you'll die..." His upper body leans forward and

he loosens his fingers from around my wrist, his voice lowering to a frightening whisper. "You'll die."

I scream when my foot nearly gives way and my nails dig into his arm with a ferocious need for life bubbling in my veins with the desperation of a caged animal. A prisoner that's been in solitary confinement for bloody years.

I'm pretty sure I scratched him, but if he's hurt, he shows no signs of discomfort.

"This isn't funny," I pant, my voice choked.

"Do you see me laughing?" His long fingers wrap around the cigarette and he takes a drag before pulling it away from his mouth. "You have until my smoke ends to give me something."

"Something?"

"Whatever you're willing to do in exchange for my *chivalrous* act of saving a damsel in distress."

I don't miss the way he stresses the word chivalrous, or the provocative way he uses words in general. As if they're weapons in his arsenal.

The battalion at his command.

He's enjoying this, isn't he? This whole situation that started with my attempts to forget has landed me with a nightmare. My gaze strays to the half-smoked cigarette and just when I'm thinking about prolonging time, he inhales what remains in a few seconds and throws the butt away. "Your time is up. Goodbye."

He starts to release himself from my hold, but I dig my nails in farther. "Wait!"

No change occurs in his features even as the air tousles his hair back. Even as I'm sure he feels me shaking with the desperation of a leaf struggling to survive.

Nothing seems to have any effect on him.

And it scares the shit out of me.

How can someone be this...this *cold*?

This detached?

This lifeless?

"Changed your mind?"

"Yeah." My voice trembles even as I attempt to sound in control of myself. "Pull me up and I'll do whatever you want."

"Sure you want to word it that way? *Whatever I want* might include a number of things that are frowned upon by the general public."

"I don't care." The moment I'm on safe ground, I'm out of this crazy wanker's orbit.

"It's your funeral." His fingers wrap around my wrist in a merciless grip and he tugs me from the edge with baffling ease.

It's as if I wasn't hanging toward death by a thread just now.

As if the water below wasn't opening its fangs to chew me in between them. Maybe, just maybe, that's not a good thing, considering the devil I'm facing.

My harsh breaths sound animalistic in the silence of the night. I attempt to regulate them, but it's of no use.

I was brought up to have a steel will and an imposing presence. I was raised with a last name that's larger than life, and with family and friends who attract attention wherever we go.

And yet, everything I knew seems to vanish at this moment. It's like I'm dissociating from who I'm supposed to be and morphing into a version even I can't seem to fathom.

And it's all because of the man standing in front of me. His features are vacant, his eyes still dull and lifeless, and every bleak color in the palette.

If I had to put a color on him, it'd most definitely be black—deadpan, cold, and a boundless hue.

I try to free my wrist from his hand, but he tightens his hold until I'm sure he'll break my bones just to peek inside them.

It's been only a minute since I met him, but I honestly wouldn't be surprised if he did break my wrist. After all, he wanted to take a picture of me falling to my death.

And while that's odd, it's downright terrifying, too. Because I know, I just know that this American stranger would be able to do it in a blink and not think about the consequences.

"Let me go," I say in a clipped tone.

His lips tip at the corners. "Ask nicely and I might."

"What's the definition of nicely to you?"

"Add a please or drop on your knees. Either will do. Doing them both at the same time would be highly recommended."

"How about neither?"

He tilts his head to the side. "That would be both pointless and foolish. After all, you're at my mercy."

In a swift movement, he pushes me to the edge again. I try to stop the brutality of his movement, but my strength is a mere straw in the face of his raw power.

In no time, my legs are hanging on the verge of the cliff, but this time, I grab hold of the strap of his camera, his shirt, and any surface I can dig my nails in.

Cold.

He's so cold, it freezes my fingers and leaves me breathless. "Please!"

An appreciative sound slips from his lips, but he doesn't drag me back. "That wasn't so hard, now, was it?"

My nostrils flare, but I manage to say, "Can you stop this?"

"Not when you didn't finish your second part of the bargain."

I stare at him, probably looking dumbfounded as hell. "Second part?"

He places a hand on top of my head, and that's when I notice that he's tall. So tall that it's intimidating.

At first, he merely caresses a few strands of my hair behind my ears. The gesture is so intimate that my mouth goes dry.

My heart beats so loudly that I think it'll rip from my rib cage.

No one has ever touched me with this level of nonnegotiable confidence. No—not confidence. It's power.

The overwhelming type.

His fingers that were just stroking my hair dig in my skull and shove down so hard, my legs give out. Just like that.

No resistance.

Nothing.

I'm falling.

Falling...

Falling...

I think he's pushed me to my death, after all, but my knees bump against the solid ground and so does my heart.

When I stare up, I find that gleam again. Earlier, I thought it was a flash of light, some semblance of white in the black.

I thought wrong.

It's black-on-black.

A shade of absolute darkness.

Pure sadism shines in his irises as he holds my head hostage, and the worst part is that if he lets go, I'll surely tumble backward.

A frightening smirk lifts his lips. "Being on your knees is highly recommended indeed. Now, should we begin?"

GLYNDON

This can't be real.
It isn't.
Shouldn't be.

And yet, as my eyes clash with the stranger's muted and absolutely lifeless ones, I'm unsure of whether this is real or if I'm caught in a nightmare.

Probably the latter.

It's not even about his savage hold on my hair, which I'm sure if I attempt to fight, he might tear from my skull—or worse, use to yank me over the cliff like he's been threatening ever since I met him.

In hindsight, I should've been ready for something like this, considering my family.

I've always thought I had unusual family and friends. Heck, Grandpa is a ruthless sociopath. So is my uncle. My brother is even worse.

But maybe since I've known them all my life, I've normalized their behavior. I've accepted it as if it were a given. Because they're functioning members of society, and I've never been their target.

I was blindsided and thought I could handle people like them if I met them in real life.

But then again, nothing could've prepared me for being in this position with someone I've just met.

The sound of crashing waves comes in sync with my chaotic thoughts. The cold air seeps through my jacket to underneath my

top, chilling the sweat clinging to my skin. I've been on fire ever since the rush of life flowed into my veins earlier so the sensation is welcome.

Despite my instinct that keeps screaming at me to run away, I'm well aware that any sudden movement will probably get me killed.

So I swallow the saliva that's gathered in my mouth and respond to his last statement, "Begin what?"

"Payment for saving you."

"You didn't." I throw a trembling hand around. "I'm still on the edge."

"And you'll remain that way until you give me what you promised."

"I didn't promise you anything."

His head cocks to the side and so does the camera, following the axis of his body with haunting, methodical motion. "Oh, but you did. And I repeat, *whatever you want*, remember?"

"Those were words I said in the heat of the moment. They don't count."

"They do to me. So either give me what I want or..." he trails off, craning his neck toward whatever's behind me. He doesn't need to voice it. I can tell where he's aiming.

It's an intimidation factor.

A looming threat.

And he knows damn well that it's working.

"Can I get up first?"

"No. What I want happens in this position."

"And what do you want?"

"Your lips around my cock."

My mouth falls open, and I hope it's a nightmare. I hope that this is some sort of a twisted joke that's gone too far and I'm supposed to laugh it off now, then go home and text the girls about it.

But I have a feeling that if I so much as breathe wrong, the situation will escalate to the worst.

"If you're not into that option, I have alternatives in mind." His hand slides from the top of my head to the hollow of my cheek and then down to my lips.

In my life, I've never been as frozen as I am right now. And it has everything to do with his cold touch. It's callous, devoid of any care, and absolutely terrifying.

This must be what it feels like to have your soul ripped out by the Grim Reaper.

His fingers slide down to my throat and he squeezes the sides hard enough to make me lightheaded and establish who holds control in this situation. "You can get on all fours so I can stick my cock in one of your remaining holes. Probably both and in no particular order."

I wish this was a façade, but there's no ounce of deceit in his tone. This crazy bastard really won't hesitate to make good on his promises.

It's only now that I realize what deep trouble I'm actually in.

This psycho will devour me alive.

If I thought I was hollow for weeks, then this will definitely end me.

Decimate me.

Tear me to pieces.

He must sense my distress, considering the trembling of my whole body. I'm like a stray bird in the middle of the windy night, being pushed in all directions.

"Which option will you go for?" the stranger asks in his casual voice that could belong to dukes and aristocrats.

There's unnerving ease in his movements and manner of speech. As if he's a robot that's running on some fucked-up battery.

But at the same time, it's like he's at war. He escalates the events so quickly that the nature of his actions turns unpredictable.

And I'm not staying around to find out to what lengths he'll take this.

Using the element of surprise, I spot the chance where his grip is somewhat relaxed on my throat, and I lunge up.

My heart soars with the explosive fireworks of adrenaline when I feel him losing his merciless hold.

I did it.

I—

I'm not even finished celebrating in my head when a loud thud sounds in the air. The air whooshes out of my lungs when my knees hit the rocks with a lethality that knocks my thoughts from my head.

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe...

That's when I realize that he's brought me down with a violent squeeze around my throat and a shove on the top of my head.

And this time, he's out to choke me. My nails dig into his wrists, my survival instinct kicking in like that of a trapped animal.

But it's like I'm colliding with a wall.

A fucking unmovable fortress.

He even compresses his fingers until I'm sure he'll snap my head from my neck.

"The running away option wasn't on the menu, now, was it?" His voice sounds far away and mingles with the ringing in my ears. And if I'm not mistaken, it's deepened, lowered, turning a darker shade of black.

Way worse than the colorless night.

Even his dim eyes have become desolate—worse than any hue I could picture.

At this moment, he's nothing short of a predator.

A callous, cold-blooded monster.

"P-please..." I croak, and it echoes like a haunting ghost song in the night surrounding us.

I can't even pray that some passerby will find us. After all, Devlin chose this place because it's isolated.

Devlin and I chose this place.

Who thought we'd experience such different yet tragic fates in it?

"Please?" he drawls the word, as if testing how it sounds on his lips.

I try to bob my head, but it's impossible with his hold on my neck.

"Please use your lips or please use your cunt and ass?" He pauses, then pushes me backward until my upper half is tilted in the cliff's direction. "Or please turn you into a masterpiece?"

Choked noises leave my lips, sounding more animalistic than human.

It's that escalation again—the reminder that this is a power play and if I keep fighting, he'll simply make this way more horrendous than I can possibly imagine.

No matter how hard I struggle, the inhumane stranger seems oblivious to it. In fact, he lifts a shoulder manically, like a damn criminal who feels no remorse whatsoever for his crimes.

"If you don't choose, I'll do it for you—"

"Lips," I strain, unsure of how I manage to get the word out.

I'm not even sure how the hell I'm still conscious, considering the raw power he's holding me with.

It's only after the word leaves my mouth that he slowly eases the brute force of his fingers from around my neck. But he doesn't release me and continues imprisoning my whole being in front of him.

I inhale a copious amount of air, my lungs filling with oxygen to the point of feeling burned, caught in a chokehold and stabbed in the chest.

He raises a thick eyebrow, appearing beautiful, gorgeous even, but it's the type of beauty that notorious serial killers use to lure their victims. I honestly wouldn't be surprised if he kills for sport.

And that's definitely the wrong thought to have under the circumstances.

It's insane how I've often thought about death but when push comes to shove, I'm terrified of it.

The stranger from hell slides his thumb against my upper lip, sensually, almost lovingly, and it's even more frightening. Because from the way he's behaved and talked, I'm almost sure there's not a gentle bone in his body.

"You'll let me stuff my cock between these lips and fill your throat with my cum?"

My neck heats since I'm not used to being spoken to this way, but I lift my chin. "I'm not doing it because I want to. I'm doing it because you're threatening me with worse. If it were up to me, I would've never let you touch me, you sick bastard."

"Good thing it's not up to you." Still keeping his hand around my throat, he slides down his zipper with his free hand, the sound

eerier than the crushing of the waves and the whooshing of the wind.

When he pulls out his penis, I try to turn my head the other way, but his grip on my neck forces me to watch every single detail.

He's big and hard, and I don't even want to think about what made him so hard.

Something warm presses against my lips and I clamp them shut, glaring up at him.

"Open," he orders, his hand clenching my hair, allowing no room for negotiation.

But I hold on to the fight in me. To that glimmer of hope that maybe he'll change his mind and this whole nightmare will be over.

I should know better.

A monster can't be changed or derailed.

A monster's only aim is to destroy.

"I can always use your ass and cunt. In that order. So unless you're willing to soak my dick with your blood and lick it clean, I suggest you open your mouth." He hits me across the lips with his dick and I have no choice but to loosen my jaw.

If I don't, there's no doubt that he'll keep his word about the other option and I'm not ready to find out how far he'll go.

How far he'll escalate.

The tip of his dick slips through my lips and my stomach coils in short intervals. I swallow down the revolting need to vomit all over him and myself.

"Don't gag when we haven't even started yet." He strokes my lower lips with that fake gentleness again. "You can enjoy this if you want, but if you fight, I suppose it'll only feel inconvenient. Now, suck and make it good."

He wants me to suck?

Fuck you. I'm a King, and we don't get told what to do.

Despite the fear that paralyzes my limbs, my gaze clashes with his as I bite down on his dick.

Hard.

With everything in me. I bite with enough force that I think I'll cut his penis off and swallow the tip.

The only reaction that comes out of the stranger is a grunt and... He's getting harder. I can feel him growing in my mouth worse than earlier.

But I don't get to continue biting.

Because he tugs on my hair as if attempting to tear it out of my skull.

Bursts of pain explode all over my body, but that's not all.

He tilts me back so my upper half is bent backward and he's looking down on me with manic eyes that could kill.

He doesn't pull out. Doesn't even appear to be in much pain.

Shit.

Maybe he really is a robot and I'm stuck with an unfeeling machine.

"Use your teeth again and I'll switch to your ass. I'll tear through your tight hole and use your blood as lube while your head hangs over the edge." There's a strain in his voice as he pushes more of his dick inside my mouth. "Now, fucking suck."

I don't dare to defy him. One, I'm on the edge, literally, and two, I have no doubt that he'll keep his word.

Problem is, I've never given head before, so I'm completely out of my league here. But I attempt to suck the crown of his dick. If his groan of pleasure is any indication, my tentative licks seem to please him.

So I do it again, and again.

"You've never given head before, have you?" There's an appreciative quality in his tone as if the wanker approves. "Hollow your cheeks and loosen your jaw. Don't just lick, suck," he instructs in a lust-filled voice as if he's speaking to a lover.

I'm so tempted to bite his dick off completely this time, but the threat of actual death forces me to abandon the idea.

Instead, I follow his command. The sooner I'm done with this, the sooner I'll be out of his deadly orbit.

"That's it," he breathes out, his tone loosening for the first time. "Use your tongue."

I do, mechanically, not even thinking about it. I also try not to think about the position I'm in. On the edge, on my knees, about to fall back, with a maniac using my mouth to get off.

If he slides my body back even an inch, I'll have no one to save me but the same person who put me in this position.

His hold on my hair stiffens, and I think I've used my teeth again, but I soon find out that's not the case.

He's done with attempting to take it easy. Or maybe he's bored.

Whatever the reason, he's just decided to take things into his own hands. Using his grip on my hair, he seizes my jaw with his fingers, forcing me to open as wide as I can.

"I like your adorable attempt at sucking cock, but how about I show you how it's properly done?" He thrusts all the way to the back of my throat. "Hmm. You have a pretty little face that looks erotic when being fucked."

I splutter, choking on my saliva and his girth and length. I haven't come across many dicks in my life, but this, without doubt, is the biggest I've seen.

And the way he drives it to the back of my throat is nothing short of a show of domination. He keeps it there, choking me until my eyes nearly bulge out. I think I'll die with his dick in my mouth.

His gaze remains on mine and he gets even harder as he watches me, my eyes bulging with tears gathering in them, and face probably turning red.

The sick bastard is going to kill me and get off on it.

But then, he slides out enough to allow me to take a sliver of a breath.

I don't even drag a whole inhale before he's ramming in again, more violently than before.

More intense.

More...out of control.

Tears sting my eyes and fall in rivulets down my cheeks. Drool and precum trickle down my chin and neck as he thrusts in and out of my mouth, still holding me at the edge with a hand.

Over and over.

And over.

Matching the brutal sound of the crushing waves below.

I'm lightheaded, my fingers throbbing and my legs shaking. I refuse to think about what's happening between them.

I'm just not that fucked in the head.

Right when I think he'll never finish, a salty taste explodes in my mouth.

My knee-jerk reaction is to spit it all out in his face, so I try to do just that. The moment he slides his dick out of my mouth, I splutter the cum all over his designer shoes.

Rugged breaths rack my chest and I inhale and exhale in rapid succession, but I don't break eye contact.

I glare as I wipe the remainder of his disgusting cum from my mouth.

At first, he watches me with a blank expression, but soon after, a low chuckle comes from his lips and for the first time tonight, light shines in his eyes. It's not black-on-black this time.

It's pure sadist light.

The light of someone so utterly pleased and satiated.

He releases my hair and jams his middle and ring fingers into my mouth. I hold on to his wrist to keep from stumbling backward and he uses the chance to smear the rest of his cum on my lips.

His fingers choke me, invading my mouth as if they have every right to, over and over.

And fucking over again.

When he seems satisfied enough, a flash blinds me.

I stare up at the camera that's covering his eyes.

Did this bastard just take a picture of me in this position?

Yes. Yes, he did.

But before I can try to snatch away his camera, he pulls his fingers from my mouth, then uses them to tuck my hair behind my ears and pats the top of my head.

"You were a good sport, Glyndon."

And then he effortlessly tugs me away from the edge, turns, and leaves.

I remain in a frozen state, unable to wrap my head around everything that just happened.

The most important of all is, how the hell does that psycho know my name?

GLYNDON

I don't know how I drive home.

There's definitely crying and some blurry vision as I strangle the steering wheel. But the persistent feeling is the constant need to follow in Devlin's footsteps and just hit the gas to the nearest cliff.

I shake my head.

Thinking about Devlin under the current situation is about the worst step I can take.

The best step I take, however, is stopping across from a police station with the intention to report what just happened.

One thing stops me from opening my car's door. What evidence do I have?

Besides, I'd rather die than have my family battle a media war for my sake. Yes, Dad and Grandpa, and even my mum, would probably shred the stranger to pieces and be willing to battle all types of wars for me if they knew.

But I'm not like them.

I'm not antagonistic and I sure as hell don't want them to be in the spotlight because of me.

I just can't do that.

And I'm so damn tired. I've been tired for months, and this will only add to the weight that has been perching on my shoulders.

Mum will be so disappointed in me if she hears that her little girl is covering for a predator. She raised me with the motto of holding my head up. She raised me to be a strong woman like herself and my late grandma.

But she doesn't need to know about this.

It's not that I'm covering up for him. I'm not. I won't make any excuses for him. I won't consider it anything less than what it is.

However, it'll remain buried between me and myself. Just like everything about Devlin.

Is justice that important? Not when I have to sacrifice my peace of mind for it.

I've already dealt with a lot of things on my own. What's another thing to add to the list?

I finally arrive at my family home with a heavy soul and a shredded heart. The blue hues of early dusk start descending over the vast property as the huge gate closes behind me. The door creaks with a haunting sound, and the fog forming in the distance doesn't help in diminishing the spookiness of the scene.

I step out of my car and freeze, staring behind me. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end and my limbs start shaking uncontrollably.

What if that crazy bastard followed me here?

What if he hurts my family?

If he so much as poses a threat to them, I'll become homicidal. No doubt about it.

I might be ready to move past what he did to me, but it's different when my loved ones are involved. I swear I'll go mental.

Long moments tick by as I inspect my surroundings with my fists clenched by my sides. Only after I've made sure I didn't actually bring a rabid dog with me do I start heading inside.

Mum and Dad made this house so big, imposing, but with enough warmth to feel like a home.

The building stretches over a large piece of land on the outskirts of London. The wooden gazebo that sits in the middle of the garden is filled with multiple paintings from our childhood.

The stars I drew when I was around three appear grotesque and absolutely appalling compared to the ones my brothers painted. I don't want to look at them or be hit with that inferiority complex.

Not now.

So I remove my shoes and sneak down to the basement. It's where our art studios are.

Right next to a world-renowned artist's.

Anyone in the art circuit knows the name Astrid Clifford King, or they'd recognize her signature, *Astrid C. King*. Her sketches have captured the hearts of critics and galleries all over the world, and she's often asked to attend as a guest of honor at an opening here and an exclusive event there.

My mum was the reason behind my and my brothers' artistic tendencies. Landon is damn effortless about it. Brandon is meticulous.

Me?

I'm chaotic to the point that I don't understand it sometimes.

I don't belong to their inner circle.

My hand trembles as I open the door leading to the studios Dad had built for us when the twins were ten.

Lan and Bran share the big one, and I have a much smaller one. I used to hang with them in my early teens, but their talent crushed my soul and I spent months unable to paint anything.

So my mum asked Dad to build me a separate one so I could have more privacy. No clue if she figured that out by herself or if Bran confided in her, but it didn't make much of a difference. At least I didn't have to be slammed by their genius and feel smaller every day.

In reality, I shouldn't even compare myself to them. Not only are they older than me, but we're also so different. Lan is a sculptor, a hardcore sadist who can and will make his subjects into stones if he gets a chance.

Bran, on the other hand, is a painter of landscapes and anything that doesn't include humans, animals, or whatever has eyes.

I'm...a painter, too. I guess. A sketcher and a dabbler in contemporary impressionism. I'm just not as defined as my siblings.

And definitely not as technical or talented.

Still, the only place I want to be right now is the small nook in my art studio.

My hand feels cold and stiff as I open the door and step inside. The automatic lights illuminate the blank canvas lining the walls.

Mum often asks where I hide my paintings, but she never pushes me to show them, even though they're just in the closet on the far wall where no one can find them.

I'm not ready to let anyone see that part of me.

This part of me.

Because I can feel the darkness shimmering under the surface. That suffocating urge to let it consume me, eat me from the inside out and just purge everything.

My fingers tremble as I pick up the can of black paint and splash it on the biggest canvas available. It smudges all the others, but I pay it no attention as I grab another can and another until it's all black.

Then I get my palette, my red colors, my palette knives, and my large brushes. I don't think about it as I create bold strokes of red, then I kill the red with the black. I even use the ladder, sliding it from one end to the other to reach the highest point on the canvas.

I go at it for what seems like ten minutes when it's actually a lot longer. By the time I step down from the ladder and slide it away, I think I'll collapse.

Or dissolve.

Or maybe I could just go back to that cliff and let the lethal waves finish the job.

I'm panting, my heart pounding in my ears, and my eyes are about to bleed the same red on the painting I just finished.

This can't be.

This...just can't be.

Why the hell would I paint this...this symphony of violence?

I can almost feel that raw touch on my heated skin. I can feel his breath over me, his control, and how he took it from me in return. I can see him in front of me with those dead eyes, tall like the devil and with the same imposing presence, his way of taking everything from me.

I can almost hear his mocking voice and his effortless manner of speech.

I can even smell him—something woodsy and raw that causes my air to get stuck at the back of my throat.

My fingers slide to my neck to where he touched me—no, choked me—when a zap slashes through my body and I drop my hand, startled.

What the hell am I doing?

What happened earlier was obscure, disturbing, and absolutely not something I should paint with these raw details.

I've never even drawn anything this big before.

Wrapping my arms around my middle, I'm about to hunch over from the assaulting pain.

Shit.

I think I'm going to throw up.

"Wow."

The low word coming from behind me startles me and I flinch as I turn my head to face my brother.

The more approachable of the twins—thankfully.

Brandon stands near the door, wearing khaki shorts and a white shirt. His hair, a realistic imitation of dark chocolate, flies in all directions, as if he just rolled out of bed and landed in my studio.

He throws a finger in the general direction of my horror-esque canvas. "You did that?"

"No. I mean, yeah...maybe. I don't know. I certainly wasn't in my right mind."

"Isn't that the state of mind all artists strive for?" His eyes soften. They're so blue, so light, so passionate, like Dad's. So troubled, too.

Ever since he developed that strong aversion to eyes, Brandon hasn't been the same.

It takes him a few steps to reach my side and wrap an arm around my shoulder. My brother is about four years older than me and it shows in every contour of his face. In every sure step he takes.

In every calculated move.

Bran has always been orange to me—warm, deep, and one of my favorite colors.

He doesn't speak for a moment, silently eyeing the painting. I don't dare to look at it or how he studies it.

I almost don't dare to breathe as his hand lies nonchalantly on my shoulder like whenever we need each other's company.

Bran and I have always been a team against the tyrant Lan.

"It's...absolutely fantastic, Glyn."

I stare at him from beneath my lashes. "Are you teasing me?"

"I wouldn't do that about art. I didn't know you were hiding this talent from us."

I would rather call this a disaster, a manifestation of my fucked-up muse, than talent.

It can be anything but talent.

"Wait till Mum sees this. She'll have a blast."

"No." I step away from him, the reassurances from earlier fading into terror. "I don't want to show her... Please, Bran, not Mum."

She'll know.

She'll see the violation in the bold strokes and the chaotic lines.

"Hey..." Bran pulls my shaking body into a hug. "It's okay. If you don't want Mum to see, I won't tell her."

"Thanks." I bury my face in his chest, and I must dirty his clothes with all the oil paint, but I don't release him.

Because for the first time since the ordeal, I can finally let go.

I feel safe from everything.

My own head included.

My fingers dig into my brother's back and he holds me. Silently.

This is why I love Bran the most. He knows how to be an anchor. He knows how to be a brother.

Unlike Lan.

After a while, we break apart, but he doesn't allow me to leave. Instead, he perches down to stare at me. "What is it, little princess?"

That's what Dad calls me. *Little princess*.

Mum is the original princess. The one Dad worships at her altar and makes all her dreams come true.

I'm the princess's daughter and, therefore, the little princess.

I wipe at the moisture in my eyes. "Nothing, Bran."

"You don't sneak to the basement at five in the morning, paint this, and then say it's nothing. It can be every word under the sun, but *nothing* should not be on the menu."

I grab a palette and start mixing random colors just to keep my mind and hands occupied.

Bran, however, doesn't drop it. He takes a long detour, then stands between me and the painting I'm totally going to throw in the nearest fire.

"Is it about Devlin?"

I flinch, my throat bobbing up and down with a swallow at the name of my friend.

At one point, my closest friend.

The boy who understood my haunting muse as much as I understood his lonely demons.

Until one day, we were ripped apart.

Until one day, we went in different directions.

"It's not about Dev," I whisper.

"Bullshit. You think we haven't noticed that you haven't been the same since his death? His suicide is not your fault, Glyn. Sometimes, people choose to leave and nothing we could have done would've stopped it."

My eyes blur and my chest constricts until it's impossible to breathe properly. "Just drop it, Bran."

"Mum, Dad, and Grandpa are worried about you. *I* am worried about you. So if there's anything we can do, tell us. Talk to us. If you don't express yourself, we're unable to go anywhere with this situation."

I feel myself disintegrating and losing ground, so I stop mixing and push the palette into his hands. "You can probably make a beautiful forest à la Bran style with all that green."

He doesn't refuse the palette, but he sighs deeply. "If you're so intent on pushing us away, you might not find us when you actually need us, Glyn."

A small smile grazes my lips. "I know."

I'm good at keeping it all in.

Bran isn't convinced and stays around to try and fish information out of me. This is probably the first time I've wished it was Lan who found me and not him. At least Lan wouldn't push.

He doesn't care.

Bran cares too much.

As do I.

After a while, however, he takes the palette and leaves. As soon as the door clicks closed, I fall to the ground in front of the painting of a dark cliff, a black star, and reds of passion.

Then I hold my head between my hands and let all the tears loose.

BY THE TIME DAY BREAKS, I'M READY TO ESCAPE WITHOUT FACING ANYONE in my family.

I pack my suitcase for the new semester, then I take a shower that probably lasts for an hour. I scrub my mouth, my hair, my hands, my nails.

Anywhere that psycho touched me.

Then I put on a pair of jeans, a top, and a jacket, ready to hit the road. I pull out my phone and text my girls. We've had a group chat since we were basically in nappies and it's where we always talk.

Ava: Is it weird that I'm losing hair because of Ari? She won't shut up about wanting to join the group chat.

Cecily: Tell her to reapply in two years once she's of age. We only talk big girl stuff here.

Ava: Big girl stuff? Bitch, where? Didn't see that on your prude menu in the last...nineteen years.

Cecily: Very funny. Rolling on the ground as we speak. Not.

Ava: You know you love me, Ces *kisses emojis*

Juggling my bag on one shoulder, I type with my other hand.

Glyndon: Ready to hit the road for uni. Who's driving?

We can actually fly to the island in a shorter amount of time, but that would mean taking a plane, and I'm scared of flying.

My screen lights up with a reply.

Ava: Not me. That's for sure. We stayed up with Mum, Dad, and our grandparents last night, and I feel like a zombie.

Cecily: I'll do it. Give me another hour. Still didn't get my fill of Mum and Papa.

I'm about to type that I'm in a hurry but stop mid-text when Ava texts back.

Ava: Gonna miss Mum and Dad like fucking shit. Grandpa and Grandma, too. Sigh. I'll even miss the troublemaker, Ari. Have you guys seen her new IG handle? Ariella-jailbait-Nash. That bold little bitch, I swear. If Dad sees it, he'll lock her the fuck up. Did I mention that I'm losing hair because of her?

With both of them being sentimental, if I said let's leave right now, it'd seem as if I were the one who was running away from my parents or something.

I'm not.

And really, I'll miss them like hell, too. Maybe even more than Ava and Cecily will miss theirs, but sometimes, I just don't like myself around my family.

When I peek down from upstairs, the dining table is already buzzing with energy.

Mum is putting some eggs in front of Bran, and Dad is helping but somehow getting in the way since he touches her every chance he gets. Something that she scolds him for but still laughs about anyway.

I stop at the base of the stairs to watch them together. It's been a habit of mine since I was young and dreamed about my own Prince Charming.

Dad is big, tall, muscular and so blond, it's like he's a Viking god, as Mum likes to call him. He's also one of the two heirs of the King fortune. A man of steel with a ruthlessness that's often spoken about in the media.

However, around Mum and us? He's the best husband and father. The man who gave me higher standards.

Ever since I was young, I've seen how he's treated my mother as if he can't inhale oxygen without her around. And I've seen how she looks at him as if he's her protector. Her shield.

Her partner.

Even now, she shakes her head as he slips a hand around her midsection and steals a kiss from her lips.

Her cheeks turn red, but she doesn't attempt to shoo him away. I inherited her height and the rich depth of her green eyes. But other than that, we're as different as night and day.

She's such a talented artist, and I can't even reach her ankle.
She's a strong woman, and I'm just...me.

Bran is oblivious to the PDA happening near him as he elegantly cuts his eggs and focuses on his tablet. Probably reading some arts magazine.

It's Mum who notices me first and promptly pushes Dad away.
"Glyn! Morning, baby."

"Morning, Mum." I plaster the brightest smile on my face, drop my backpack on the chair, and kiss her cheek, then Dad's.
"Morning, Dad."

"Morning, little princess. Where did you sneak to last night?"

I step back with a start and stare at Bran, who merely lifts a shoulder. "I wasn't the only one who noticed."

"I just went out to get some air," I whisper, dropping down beside my brother.

Mum and Dad take their seats with my father at the head of the table. He picks up his fork and knife and speaks without taking a bite. "You could've gotten some air within the property. Roaming around at night is dangerous, Glyndon."

You have no idea how true that statement is.

I take a sip of my orange juice to stop myself from reliving the rotten memories from last night.

"Let her be, Levi." Mum passes me a boiled egg—well-cooked, the way I like—with a smile. "Our Glyn is a big girl now and can take care of herself."

"Not if she's attacked by some crazy scum in the middle of the night."

I choke on the bit of juice that's stuck in my mouth. Bran passes me a napkin and gives me a weird look.

Shit.

Please don't tell me it's written all over my face.

"Don't jinx it," Mum tells him with a frown, then points at the egg. "Eat, honey."

I stuff my mouth with the white of the egg and Mum shakes her head when I basically throw most of the yolk away.

"Do you need anything?" Dad asks, seeming suspicious of me. Jeez. I really hate having him in this mode. He's like a crooked detective fishing for any sort of information.

"No, no. I'm fine."

"Good. But if you happen to need something, let me or your brothers know," he says after swallowing his food.

"Will do."

"Speaking of your brothers," Mum fixes me and Bran with her stern parental gaze. "I heard you two avoid Landon on campus?"

"It's not that we avoid him..." I start.

"It's that he doesn't have time for us with all the attention he gets from both professors and students," Bran finishes, lying through his teeth.

Because we do try to spend as little time with him as possible.

"Still." Mum makes me a piece of toast, still treating me as if I'm a little girl. "You guys go to the same university and even the same art school, so I'd hoped you'd at least keep your bond."

"We'll work on it, Mum," I say in my pacifying tone, because even though Bran isn't antagonistic either, he can definitely channel that energy when it comes to Lan.

I start to get up, my stomach feeling heavy and absolutely refusing to accept more food.

After kissing my parents goodbye and telling Bran I'll see him later, I contemplate driving to Grandpa's house, but he's probably at work now.

Also, if a slight interrogation from Dad rustled my feathers, an encounter with Grandpa will probably make me break down.

So I send him a good morning email. Because my granddaddy doesn't do texts. Doesn't even honor them with a look.

I'm about to tuck my phone away when it pings with a text.

I think maybe Grandma is texting on Grandpa's behalf, but it's an unknown number.

My heart nearly explodes from my chest when I read the words.

Unknown Number: Maybe you should've died with Devlin, huh? After all, that was the plan, wasn't it?

GLYNDON

Brighton Island is a large piece of land surrounded by forests and sea and is riddled with infamous castles from the Middle Ages.

However, almost half of the land has been used for centuries as an education hub. The other half is filled with some locals and a lot of pubs, shops, and entertainment parlors for the students.

Two large, regal universities occupy the north of Brighton. One is American and the other, where I study, is British. Admission into Royal Elite University—commonly known as REU—is as hard as securing an audience with the queen. Not only because of the fees that just the rich and their granddaddies can afford, but also because the educational system is tough.

The campus is divided into different universities with all important majors—such as arts, business, medicine, law, and human sciences. The education goes from bachelor degrees to PhDs.

Some students spend all their youth between the castle-like walls, studying until they collapse. But they still do it anyway.

Why?

Because those who graduate from here are granted a diploma that anyone in the world would immediately accept. The founders of Royal Elite University have picked the best professors, best councilors.

Best everything.

Except for maybe the location.

Because there's that small detail I mentioned earlier. We share the north of Brighton Island with an infamous university.

The King's U.

They're founded by unknown money coming from the other side of the pond. Most students there are American and have a chip on their shoulders. Which is funny because they call us the snobby, posh rich kids.

They, however? They're the dangerous kids.

The ones who walk with a chip on their shoulders and promise of crime on their faces.

Their university only has three main majors. Business, law, and medicine. That's it. I think they used to have human sciences, but they closed it.

Cecily says it's because they have no human bones in their bodies.

While REU is posh, sophisticated, and reeks of old aristocratic money, The King's U is all about new money, sharp stares, and threatening auras.

We're specifically told to stay away from them.

As far as possible.

And we do. But it almost always gets muddled in sports events.

But generally, there's an invisible line between our two campuses. Between our posh English manners and their all-American ones.

It's been like this for years. Way before my friends and I came along. In fact, there's a high wall that separates their campus and dormitory from ours.

One that can't be climbed or jumped over.

A wall that represents the deep hole between the two of us. Unless we have a competition with them, we don't tread into each other's waters.

Which is why I'm pulling on Cecily's hand and promptly stopping her from barging into their campus.

We've barely just arrived and we're currently near the metal gate. A golden lion holding a key sits at the top, under which is the name 'Royal Elite University' in sophisticated writing.

Even Ava, who'd usually be hugging her cello for dear life, has abandoned it and is holding on to Cecily's other arm.

"Be reasonable, Ces. Just because you couldn't find your notes, doesn't mean one of The King's U's students took them. They don't have access to our campus, remember?"

Cecily's silver-dyed hair falls in disarray as she attempts to release herself from our hold. Her black shirt that says *How About No* kind of translates her whole mood. "Their stupid football team logo was on my locker. It's them. And I'm going to see this through to the end."

"And go missing?" I sigh, feeling the tension rising to my head.

"Small price to pay to catch those pricks."

"You won't be saying that when they get you locked up in their basement or something." Ava shudders, then whisper-yells, "You know those rumors about them being financed by mafia money? I totally believe it. And I'm definitely not going to let you be chopped up nineties mafia movie style."

"We're in a country of law," Cecily says with pure determination, and she even sounds to believe it.

"Law is bullshit to some people," I say, feeling the terror from two days ago mounting to my throat.

"What she said." Ava bobs her head up and down, then flips her blonde ponytail back. "Now, can we go back to the dorm without worrying about finding Ces's corpse floating in the sea tomorrow?"

I can tell Cecily wants to continue with her original plan, despite our warnings. She's usually laid back, but not when her things are touched, and I honest to God think she doesn't give two flying fucks about the reputation of The King's U's students.

She might even witness them doing horrendous acts and would choose to psychoanalyze them instead of running the hell away.

Like her hair, she's silver to me, not really white, and can be smudged with black.

Ava is, without doubt, pink, like her dress, aura, and personality.

"Excuse me?"

A soft voice interrupts my and Ava's attempts to drag Cecily back with us to the dorms.

We share a small apartment at the top that costs a fortune but at least gives us the chance to stay together.

I stare back to find a petite girl, around my height but way leaner and with a lithe body, standing near REU's gate. Her brown hair falls to her neck and her blue eyes are big and breathtaking amidst her small features. Juggling a soft pink backpack with a fluffy kitten keychain on one shoulder, she rests her matching suitcase on the asphalt and stares at us.

She's wearing a purple dress with a lacy hem with an elegance that rivals Ava's princess wardrobe.

Having the same reaction as me, my friends study her intently. It's Ava who asks, "Do you need something?"

"Yes, would you please tell me where the School of Art is?"

American.

The new girl, who must be right out of high school, is definitely an American—if the accent is any indication. And while we do have some American students at REU, they're very few and far between. They always try to get to The King's U first. It's also why almost all of us British students don't even attempt to apply to the other university.

"Are you perhaps lost?" I say with a warm tone, then point behind her. "The King's U is that way."

"Oh, I know. They don't have a ballet school there, so I applied here and luckily got accepted between semesters. I'm going to try and do the college thing aside from ballet, but we'll see how that goes." She smiles brightly. "I'm Annika Volkov, by the way. You can call me Anni or Anne. Just not Nika."

"I'm Ava Nash. A cellist. I study classical music at the School of Arts and Music."

"Cecily Knight. Psychology major."

The newcomer, Annika, stares at me expectedly, and I realize she's waiting for me to also introduce myself.

I'm so out of it lately, it's a little embarrassing. Maybe I should lock myself in my room for the week to come.

"Glyndon King. I'm a studio art student in the same school as Ava."

"Nice to meet you all. I'm sure we'll get along."

"Judging by your fashion sense, I'm sure we will." Ava glues herself to Annika's side. "Let us show you around your new school first."

Cecily slides her black-framed glasses over her nose and shakes her head in a 'here we go again' gesture. Ava has always been the most social out of us, and she's probably met her match in Annika since they're chattering happily about fashion and the latest trends.

We let Ava guide Annika through the giant halls as Cecily and I fall a step behind.

I feel a flash of movement in my peripheral vision and I freeze. Slowly, I turn back, only to find some students are buzzing around.

But the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end and sweat trickles down my back.

Cecily nudges me. "Want to bet on how long it'll take for her to call the new girl her bestie?"

I startle and hold in a yelp. "What? Ah... Ava? Yeah, probably soon."

Cecily stops in her tracks, watching me intently. "What's up, Glyn? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Nothing... I just spaced out."

She touches my arm and I know not to take that for granted. Cecily is the type who has her emotions in a vault, so the fact that she's offering me any type of consolation is a big deal in and of its own.

"I know the pain must still be raw, but it'll get better with time, Glyn. I promise."

I stare dumbfounded for a beat, and then I realize she's talking about Dev. That should've been my first thought, too, but right now? When I felt a shadow following me?

That definitely wasn't on my mind.

"Thanks, Ces." I rub her arm back, grateful to have her.

She's a year older than Ava and me and the most serious out of all of us, but she's also the most motherly. Probably why she chose to study psychology in the first place.

If I tell her about the other night, she'll listen and won't judge me.

But that means I'll have to tell her why I was there in the first place, and that's just not going to happen.

Not in this lifetime.

A small smile lifts her lips. "Let's go save the poor soul from Ava."

"How about you save me from my misery instead?" The cool tone takes us by surprise, and soon enough, the owner of said voice barges into the space between me and Cecily and wraps an arm around our shoulders.

Remington Astor, or just Remi—who's about three years older than me—grins down on us with his all-encompassing charm. His brown eyes twinkle with mischief and pure trouble. He's built like a Greek god and has an aristocratic nose that's courtesy of 'his lordship' stature, as he likes to remind us. Small tidbit about Remi, he always talks about himself in third person and says things like, 'my lordship did this' and 'my lordship did that.'

Someone else follows close behind him. My cousin, Creighton. Well, technically, Creigh is my second cousin since my dad and his are cousins. However, my brothers and I always called his dad Uncle Aiden.

He's a year older than me and so extremely quiet that you barely hear his voice, but that shouldn't be mistaken for shyness. This little shit simply doesn't give a fuck about anyone.

Or anything.

His silence is merely a manifestation of his boredom. And somehow, that gets him all the attention on campus without him even trying. It's been like that ever since our secondary school days.

That, and the fact that he does a lot of fighting.

And while his sharp features and piercing blue eyes have something to do with his popularity, it's his 'I don't give a shit' attitude that makes girls melt for him faster than cheese on pizza.

The more he ignores them, the more crushingly popular he becomes. Something that Remi doesn't appreciate since Creigh's stealing away his golden-boy status.

They're both business majors—Creigh is second year, while Remi is fourth year. Needless to say, girls in the business school fall over themselves to get a sliver of their attention.

I've grown up with these guys all my life. Our parents have been friends since they were in school, and we've kept the legacy going.

When you're children of parents who hold the personality of gods, you learn to stick together. To somehow keep up with the pressure of having such parents.

It's part of the reason why we're naturally close. In a way, Remi and Creigh are no different than Lan and Bran.

Okay, maybe just Bran. Lan is in a league of his own.

Cecily rolls her eyes at Remi's dramatic tone. "And what misery might that be?"

"The fact that none of you girls asked me for a ride back to campus. I even had all your favorite songs saved for the road trip."

"That's because we could drive just fine," Cecily says. "Besides, you left me on Read the last text I sent you."

"*Moi?*" He releases me, retrieves his phone, and stops in his tracks. "No way in fuck... Creigh, you little shit. What did you do now? Did you crack my code?"

My cousin, who's on the other side of me, shrugs but says nothing.

I crane my head and find Remi's phone filled with pornographic pictures.

"Pig," I say under my breath.

Cecily goes red, and if Ava were here, she'd call her a prude, because she is, in a way. Cecily just doesn't do well with any talk that's sexual in nature.

"You're disgusting," she tells Remi.

"No, Creigh is." Remi grabs my cousin by the collar of his polo shirt. "He's the one who hacked into my phone and put all of that in."

Creigh's expression remains poker-faced. "Proof?"

"I'll beat the fuck out of your arse, you cheeky bastard."

"You can try."

"I can't believe this!" Remi grumbles. "I adopt a weirdo under my lordship's umbrella and he tries to sabotage not only my popularity status but also my noble name. I'm going to disown you, spawn! Don't come running to me with your tail tucked between your legs when you can't slip out of a crowd on your own."

"I'll survive."

Creigh's methodical, somewhat emotionless reply only riles Remi up more. "Don't text my lordship when you're bored."

"You're the one who does that."

Remi narrows his eyes, then grins. "I won't be covering up for you when your parents call. Try beating that one, spawn."

Cecily interlinks her arm with Creigh. "Never mind him. We've got you."

"Hey!! Don't go stealing my adoptive son." Remi pushes her away and inspects Creigh. "Did the female cougar do anything to you, spawn? Tell my lordship and I'll take care of her."

My cousin raises a brow. "I thought you were disowning me?"

"Nonsense. If I disown you, how will you survive?"

"Are you sure it's not the other way around?" Cecily crosses her arms. "Your attention to Creigh is the method you use to feel that you're doing good, so it's self-service."

"The nerd police called and they're saying you're too nerdy for anyone's liking."

"Sure it wasn't the manwhore police saying you're at top risk of STDs?"

"Says the prude."

"If you think that's an insult, try again. At least I'm not at risk of contracting STDs."

"There's a thing called a condom. Ever heard of it? Oh, sorry, forgot you're a prude."

"He did forget to use one once," Creighton says and we all turn to him. "Condom."

Remi headlocks him. "Don't go telling my lordship's secrets, you cheeky bastard."

Cecily is like a dog who's found a bone and goes after Remi with the viciousness of a warrior.

I laugh, or more accurately force it out, pretending to be happier than I actually am. Pretending that this scene can help reduce the chaos brewing inside me.

A dash of black flashes in my peripheral vision, and I spin around so fast, I'm surprised I don't trip.

It was there again.

I'm sure that someone was looking at me from the shadows, watching my every move.

My body heat rises and I rub my palm on the side of my shorts. Once.

Twice.

My phone burns in my pocket and I can't stop thinking about the text I got two days ago.

I refused to think about it at the moment, shoved it to the background, and pretended that it belonged with the rest of the baggage that's ruining my life. But I don't think I can do that anymore.

Is it even about Dev anymore?

Or is it so much worse?

The banter from the group I'm in starts dissolving until it becomes white noise. My vision turns blurry.

Everything is.

I can't even see my fingers.

My right foot steps back and then the other follows. I'm retreating, but I don't know where to.

Or how.

All I'm sure about is that I need to get the hell out of here.

Now.

I'll text the guys later and tell them I was feeling under the weather. Though maybe I need to switch up that excuse, considering I've used it quite a few times lately—

A strong hand slams against my mouth and I shriek as I'm flung backward.

The only sound that comes out of me is an eerie, muffled noise overflowing with desperation for life.

A savage hand wraps around my mouth as my back hits the wall. My eyes widen when they meet with those psychotic ones.

They're dim, lifeless—just like two nights ago.

He tsks, his voice a darkened whisper. "You sure are hard to be found alone, Glyndon."

GLYNDON

Grandpa once told me there will be times when I'll feel so trapped that a way out seems impossible.

I'll be suffocated.

I'll feel so out of my element, as if all the walls are closing in on my heart.

He said that if I felt that way, the key is to stay calm, to not let fear seep in.

A disaster might or might not kill you, princess. But being terrified of it would definitely finish you.

I wish I had enough access to my brain so I could use it to put Grandpa's words into perspective. I wish I was strong like him, Uncle, Dad, or Mum.

I wish I wasn't thinking about ways of dissolving into the wall or the earth.

Or anywhere that's not in the stranger's field of vision. His body covers my front and it's all hard, strong, and so terrifying, I feel like I'm going to throw up.

Memories from two nights ago slash my bruised conscience and ugly voices scream in my head.

Loud.

Louder.

I think... I'm having a panic attack.

I can't have a panic attack. I've always been apathetic in a way, hard to have emotions pulled out of me, and even harder to translate them in the sensory world without my brush. So why the hell am I panicking?

My eyes don't leave the stranger's muted ones and it hits me then.

It's because of them that I'm having this reaction.

These eyes that resemble the clashing of a rainy forest with the night. During the night, I couldn't decipher their color, but even in the light, the green and blue are so dark, it's as if they're colorless.

He's colorless, and not in a bland sense, but in the exact opposite way.

Mum says the eyes are the window to a person's soul. In that case, there's a black hole where this bastard's soul is supposed to be.

The hand he imprisons me with against the wall isn't harsh, but it's firm enough to translate that he's the one with the power. The one who can turn a mere touch into an act of violence as he did before. Since I already had an encounter with him, he's already established his savagery and that no societal standards bind him. So even though he's holding me with infinite ease, appearing as if he's not exerting any type of force, I know better.

I really, *really* know better.

Hot breaths kiss the side of my cheek as he hikes up an arm over my head and leans down to speak so close to my face that I taste the words instead of hearing them. "I'm going to remove my hand from your mouth and you'll be quiet for me. Scream, and I'll resort to unpleasant methods."

I continue staring at him, feeling trapped by his height and physique. I thought he was big two days ago, but it's like he's gained an extra presence.

His fingers flex on my cheeks, demanding my whole attention. "Nod if you understand."

I slowly bob my head. I have no interest in finding out what this psycho finds unpleasant. Besides, I'm holding out the conviction that he can't do anything to me with so many people around.

Yes, we're in the secluded area near the library, but it's not like no one passes by. It's still a public place.

He slides his hand away from my face, but before I can breathe in air, he glides it to the hollow of my throat, his fingers

digging into the sides. It's not meant to choke me, but more to put the threat there.

It's meant to communicate that if he wants to, he can snuff out my air at any moment.

"You said you'd let me go." I'm thankful I sound calm and I'm not the panicky, absolutely disgraceful version from earlier.

"I said I'd remove my hand, not that I would let you go."

"Can you let me go?"

"I like it when you ask, but the answer to your question is no." The pads of his fingers press into the flesh of my neck. "I kind of like this position."

He doesn't look to have the capacity to like anything. Hell, his expression is so neutral that it's hard to imagine him doing something fun.

Does he even have emotions like the rest of us?

Considering he was willing to see me die just so he could photograph me, and then he made me suck him off, he probably doesn't.

Still, I force myself to stare into his apathetic eyes at the expense of being swallowed in their darkness. "What do you want from me?"

"Haven't figured that out yet, but I will soon."

"While you're at it, you should also figure out how you'll get out of prison."

A slight smirk tilts his lips. "Why would I go to prison?"

"For assaulting me," I hiss under my breath, watching our surroundings for any passersby.

"The fact that you're speaking about it in a hushed tone means you didn't report it."

"Doesn't mean I won't."

"By all means, do."

"You're not scared?"

"Why would I be?"

"You could be arrested."

"For receiving a blowjob you so benevolently offered?"

"I didn't offer you anything." Fire bubbles in my veins and I attempt to release myself, but his merciless grip on my neck doesn't allow me to even move.

"Oh, but you did. You said you preferred the lips instead of the cunt or the ass."

"Because I was under threat!"

He lifts a shoulder. "Semantics."

I stare at him. Like really stare at his messy hair and his muscles that bulge through his black shirt. I stare at his passive face and unchanging eyes, and I'm almost sure I'm dealing with a robot at this point.

"You...really don't think you did anything wrong, do you?"

"Is saving you considered something wrong?"

"You didn't save me!"

"You were going to fall to your death, but I caught you. Last I checked, that's called saving in every dictionary, so how about you show more gratitude?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. How should I do that? Get on my knees again?"

"Preferably." His thumb caresses my bottom lip and my breath hitches when his voice rumbles, "I liked these lips. What they lack in experience, they make up for with pure enthusiasm. There's something about the nervous energy of the first time and your innocence that made it quite memorable. I bet it'll feel more euphoric when I tear through your cunt and make you bounce off my cock."

My mouth falls open, completely and utterly lost for words. The stranger uses the chance to press his thumb against my bottom lip so hard that I think he's trying to glue it to my chin. "I keep imagining the expressions you'll make when I throw you down and shove my cock deep inside your cunt. Bet it'll be hard to choose between it and your mouth."

I'm trembling, I realize, my fingers twitching and my limbs nearly giving up on me. But I still glare at him. "Why are you doing this to me? You have the looks to get anyone you want. Why me?"

A wolfish grin tilts his mouth. "You think I'm attractive?"

"Like hell I do."

"You just said I have the looks."

"Physical, that anyone can see."

"I'm not interested in just anyone. It's you I'm focused on right now."

"But why?"

He lifts a shoulder. "Beats me."

My jaw aches from how much I'm clenching it. This bastard has turned my life into a nightmare for the past couple of days and he doesn't even know why.

So I provoke him. Probably not the best choice, but I have no other way to hurt him.

"I'd never, *ever* give you the time of day or look in your direction if I had a choice. *Never.*"

"Never say never, baby."

"I'm not your baby."

"You're whatever the fuck I call you, *baby.*" He tugs on my lip again before he releases my mouth.

It's swollen, puffy, and feels so sore, as if I've been kissing for hours.

No, no. I'm not going to think about kissing while this prick is here.

"Seriously, what do you want from me? I don't even know your name, and I have no clue how you know mine."

"Maybe we have more in common than you think."

"What...is that supposed to mean?"

"You're a smart girl. You'll figure it out."

"Just like you'll figure out what you want from me?" I can't hide the sarcasm from my tone, and he smiles.

"Exactly. You're a fast learner."

"Not fast enough to find a way to get rid of you."

"That won't be possible from your end, so don't fry those neurons for nothing. Just...be good."

"Who the hell are you to tell me whether I should be good, bad, or anything in between?"

"I don't need a label to get what I want. You already know that."

A sudden shudder jolts through my system. He's subtly reminding me of how he easily escalated from nothing to full-on violation and that if I provoke him, it wouldn't be abnormal for him to do the same.

Over and over until I learn my lesson.

I can't help the need to face him head-on. "What does that entail exactly? Forcing me again?"

"I'd rather not. Unlike the impression I gave on the cliff, violence is not my first method of choice. However, if I have to resort to disagreeable options, I will. So don't make me, baby. I'd rather we start on a clean slate."

"Fuck. You."

He releases a low chuckle that sends chills down my spine. It doesn't reach his eyes, not even close, but it's the first time he's shown any semblance of human emotion. And I don't know why I find myself memorizing every second of it.

"Such a foul mouth for a pretty little face." The sound disappears as soon as it appeared as his fingers grab the sides of my throat. Hard. So hard that he's practically choking me.

"Cursing me isn't the definition of a clean slate, Glyndon. We were just talking about you being good, so how about you stick with that, hmm?"

He releases me as fast as he grabbed me and I splutter for air, my lungs nearly giving out. "What the hell is wrong with you and choking me?"

"How else will I get your full attention? Besides..." He rubs his thumb against the rest of his fingers. "I like the feel of your quickening pulse."

I swallow as if gut-punched. There are so many dark emotions hidden behind his words and I don't know whether to scream or cry—or do both at the same time.

He steps back, returning the space he robbed so suddenly. "I'll keep an eye on you. Be good, baby."

And then he's walking away, mingling with the crowd as if he wasn't just stealing my air and existence.

I slump against the wall, holding my head between my hands.

What the hell just happened? How did I attract such a predator?

And most importantly, what can I do to keep him away from me?

"Kill!"

I lift my head to find Annika accompanied by Ava. Her brows dip as she watches where the stranger disappeared into the

crowd.

"K-Kill?" I stammer despite myself, and Ava levels me with a stare.

She's well aware I'm not the type to stammer or speak without weighing my every word. But the circumstances are different now. I thought the nightmare had ended two nights ago, but in hindsight, I should've known it had just begun.

I somehow attracted the attention of a boundless, soulless savage.

"Killian Carson," Annika says. "Resident charming god of our high school and The King's U, too. He's a fourth-year med student, despite being only nineteen. Obviously, he skipped a few grades, like me. Though I only skipped one and I'm seventeen. I'll be eighteen soon, by the way, so don't treat me like a kid."

Wait.

He goes to The King's U? Is that how he knows my name? But I'm not in contact with anyone from that university except for Devlin when we used to sneak out.

He found me on IG and after that, we talked, then met.

Other than that, I'm not that familiar with the 'dangerous' kids.

Though I have heard about the two notorious clubs at The King's U. Heathens and Serpents. Both have mafia backgrounds, rule the university, and they're rivals.

If that isn't fun enough, they both hate our own power-filled club, Elites.

The three of them compete in underground fights, sports events, and creepy night activities that are only spoken about in hushed tones behind closed doors.

Oh, and remember my brother, Lan? He's the current leader of the Elites.

Does this mean the stranger—Killian, very fitting damn name—recognizes me because of my brother?

But then again, Lan always kept the club's activities separate from his personal life.

"How do you know him?" I ask Annika despite myself.

She taps her chin. "We...kind of run in the same crowd. Well, not really. We're not friends or anything, God forbid. He's, well, you could say acquaintances with my brother. Scratch that, they're

really close and I've been specifically told to stay away. By specifically, I mean that my brother would take away my socials if I go near his friends. Can you imagine that type of torture?" She wraps her arms around herself. "I just got chills."

"Oh my God!" Ava snaps her fingers. "I knew your last name sounded familiar. Your brother is Jeremy Volkov, isn't he?"

"*The* Jeremy Volkov?" I repeat, incredulous.

I'm a certified hermit, but even I heard the name as soon as I stepped foot on Brighton Island. Jeremy Volkov is older than us, my brothers' age, and is currently finishing his master's degree.

The reason his name is so infamous in both our campuses is due to the fact that he's a god that should not be crossed.

It's said that he killed someone who pissed him off—strapped rocks to his body and threw him to the bottom of the ocean. Once, a student tripped against his car and hobbled away with a broken leg.

Another time, someone accidentally spilled water on him, then went ahead and punched himself to escape his wrath.

Of course, it's all rumors, but they're savage rumors. The type of rumors that clearly tell us peasants to stay the hell away from him.

Because, of course, Jeremy is the leader of the Heathens. Rumor has it that the initiation process into the club starts by spilling blood.

Rumor also has it that the other Heathens are as crazy as he is. Some are even worse.

I didn't know their names before, but something tells me Killian's name belongs there.

Kill.

That's what Annika—who's currently fidgeting from one foot to the other—called him. He's a 'kill' type of person.

Grandpa Henry, Mum's father, told me that every person has a share of their name.

Killian is the entirety of his name.

Annika lowers her head. "What are the chances of going back to before you learned that piece of information about my brother?"

"Slim to none," Ava says. "Can't believe you're siblings."

"I mean, he's not as bad as the rumors say. He's the best brother alive and cares about me."

"He ruins people's lives for fun," Ava says matter-of-factly.

"We can't choose our siblings?" Annika tries with an awkward smile.

"Can totally relate." Ava sighs. "Still. This is big news. I'm surprised he let his sister study at REU. I thought he hated us."

"He probably does since he said, and I quote, 'REU is filled with spineless, spoiled brats who only know how to spend their trust funds and don't have the slightest clue about how to grow them.' And he didn't get a say in it since I got Papa's approval after a lot of begging and promising to be good. But none of those methods worked, *duh*. The only thing that did was having Mom convince him. Lucky for me, he can't say no to her." She grins, then stares between us sheepishly. "You don't hate me?"

"Why would we?" I inch closer to her. "You're welcome aboard."

"Yeah," Ava echoes. "Your brother is a scary twat, but you're a total doll."

She blushes, seeming over the moon with the compliment. "Aww, thanks."

Ava and Annika gush over each other for a bit before Annika studies me as if searching for a hanging limb. "I know we just met, but I feel the need to warn you about Kill. If you think my brother is bad, Killian might be worse. He's always been popular, worshiped and fawned upon as if he was God on earth, but there's something off about him, you know. Like his whole social life is a façade for what's truly lurking inside. His smile *never* reaches his eyes, and all his relationships have been flings and hookups. In fact, I don't think he's ever had a relationship. Even his own brother doesn't care for him that much. It's like he's living, but not alive...as if he's..."

"A monster," I finish for her.

"I was going to say a psychopath. Anyhow, he's bad news and I don't want to see you hurt."

Too late.

He's already took a part of me that I'll never be able to get back.

"Is he part of your brother's secret club?" Ava asks, then leans over to whisper, "*Heathens?*"

Annika gives a small laugh. "Ha...ha... I'm not supposed to talk about that or Jer will kill me. But yeah, he is, whatever. Kill is probably the mastermind behind it in the first place."

"What do they do there?" Ava implores, closing in on her like a teacher interrogating a quiet student.

"Don't know, don't care. I keep out of their business and that allows me to fly under their radar. I mean, I have a clue about what's going on, because the guards like me, but I pretend I'm clueless."

I rub my palm on my shorts, contemplating her words. Does that mean if I remain still, I'll also fly under their radar?

My phone beeps and I startle before slowly fishing it out.

Unknown Number: Careful, Glyndon. You might accidentally become the next target.

KILLIAN

I learned early on that I don't fit in the normalized, stagnant, preached society.

I was born to reign over it.

No questions asked.

Control isn't only a need or a fleeting desire. It's a necessity that's as pressing as breathing air.

Deep inside me lurks a serial killer with fucked-up fetishes and constant demands to satiate its desires. Sometimes, the urge is dull enough to ignore, but other times, it gets to be so much that red becomes the only color I see.

However, I'm not low on impulse control like some other idiots. And I'm certainly not allowing a mere compulsion, obsession, or fixation to rob my control.

Which is why it's imperative to keep that serial killer entertained, quenched, and absolutely sedated.

If my true nature were to be revealed to the world, the situation would get complicated and tears would look ugly on Mom's face. She thinks I'm reformed and it's going to stay that way until her death.

Or mine.

My father is much sharper and, therefore, harder to convince of my socializing habits, but he'll eventually come around.

Either that or he'll willingly choose to hurt my mom, which is something he'd rather die before doing.

It's convenient to have parents who love each other to the point of madness. That way, they can focus on each other and

their dream family instead of my fucked-up tendencies.

Asher and Reina Carson are New York's untouchable socialites. Dad is the managing partner of Grandfather's mega-huge law firm and uses his influence to save old geezers from legal shit. Mom, however, has chosen an entirely different path and is the founder of countless charitable organizations. A true immortal social butterfly and Mother Teresa's clone at her finest.

There's also their golden child—Gareth. The neurotypical Gareth. The one who's following in both our parents' footsteps Gareth. The exemplary law student and charity volunteer Gareth.

He's definitely the child they bargained for when they lit up incense during their procreation sessions. Not only is he built similarly to them, but his existence also gives them the satisfaction of being parents.

It's definitely not me, and the reason is fairly simple.

Once upon a time, I was plagued by the urge to see underneath animals' skin. Humans, too, but I only had access to animals. I contemplated scissoring up our fat cat, Snow, but Mom was crying when he got sick, so I left him alone.

Once I could cut open a few mice I caught in a dumpster, I came home running and brought them to my mother, happy that I could finally see what their red eyes hid.

She nearly fainted.

In my seven-year-old mind, I didn't exactly understand her reaction.

She should've been proud of me. She was proud when the absolutely lazy Snow brought her some insects.

"Is it because I spilled blood all over the house? Don't worry, Mom. The maid will clean it," is what child me said ever so naturally as she cried in Dad's embrace.

I'll never forget the way they looked at me back then—Mom, with horror. Dad, with a furrowed brow, pursed lips, and...I think, pain.

At that moment, it felt as if they were mourning the death of their second born.

After that incident, and into my teens, I went through all sorts of tests and psychologists and yada fucking yada.

They slapped a label on me—severe form of antisocial personality disorder, ‘differences’ in the amygdala and other neurological areas, forms of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and fuck knows what—then sent me home with treatment methods.

Thank fuck I overcame that shackled version and adapted to their ‘treatment,’ to social expectations, and eventually became the me from the present.

Absolutely collected, definitely socially accepted—worshiped, even—and I no longer make my mother cry.

In fact, I talked to her earlier on the phone. She said she loves me, I said I love her more, and I’m sure she hung up with a bright smile on her face.

If you give people what they want, they like you, adore you, even.

All you have to do is conform to standards while slightly rising above normal, and repress your true nature.

At least, in daylight.

Night time, however, is a gray area.

I roam my gaze over the mansion’s first floor, filtering through the college students’ drunk skinny-dipping, cocaine inhaling, and vain fucking lives. Their jumping to the loud music is no different than a crooked version of monkeys on crack.

I’ve been at this party for a whole ten minutes and I still haven’t spotted anything that’s worthy of my attention.

And it’s being held in my fucking mansion.

Well, I share it with my brother, cousin, and Jeremy, and it’s all due to our leadership status in Heathens—and the amount of money our fathers pump into this college’s veins.

In fact, we own it. Every single part and person in it.

The property might be vast and with enough rooms to start a brothel, but it feels so small sometimes.

The whole world is.

A body clashes into mine from behind and a tattooed arm, full of skulls and ravens, snakes around my shoulder as I’m assaulted by the stench of alcohol and weed.

Nikolai.

“Yo, Killer!”

I grab my cousin's arm and throw it off without masking my reaction to the blasphemous act of touching me.

He slides beside me, leaning on the wall that's near the bar but hidden enough for me to pass under people's radars.

"Hey, motherfucker." He taps his jeans and produces a joint, then rubs it against his lips before he shoves it in his mouth and lights it. "What's with acting disgusted?"

"Why? Are you disgusting?"

"On most days. Not today." He grabs me by the shoulder again and I'm ready to break his fucking arm.

The black dots appear in my mind's eye, heightening, pulsing, fucking multiplying into tinier, more miniscule ticks.

I might get off on touch, but only on my terms and when I'm the one who controls every aspect of it.

And this asshole is digging his own grave.

I wonder if Aunt Rai will cry too hard if she loses her son in a mysterious disappearance incident.

The tricky thing is that she's identical twins with my mother, and if she cries, Mom will definitely cry harder. At least Aunt Rai is part of the Russian mafia. Mom is a believer of everything sunshine and could—would—be hit harder by her nephew's disappearance into *nowhereland*.

All in all, the whole ordeal isn't worth letting my impulse loose.

Repress.

Repress.

Nikolai shakes my shoulder with the hand that'll be in a cast if the motherfucker doesn't read the atmosphere.

He's about my age and has long dark hair that falls to his neck if it's loose but is now held in a small ponytail. The whole look is finished with pierced ears—and dick—because he thought he suffered from trypophobia, and the genius figured the best way to get rid of that was to drill holes in his body.

Turns out, he doesn't actually have it, and it was a phase. Like the tattoos, the hair, the style.

Sometimes, he goes all grunge, denim with jeans. Other times, he dresses in weird fashionable shit that gets him all the attention and more.

Mostly, he roams around half-naked—like tonight—allegedly allergic to shirts. His chest is a map of tattoos that could be spotted from Mars and frowned upon by aliens.

Still, his parents are leaders in the Russian mafia and he comes from a long legacy of the Bratva leaders. He'll also assume a position there one day. So college is just a learning phase so that he knows the ropes of the business.

In fact, most students at The King's U are associated with the mafia one way or another and our professors are close with the big guys.

"What's the plan for tonight, Satan's heir?" Nikolai blows smoke in the direction of a girl passing by and she gives a flirty look. "What will we do for the initiation?"

"Ask Jeremy." I tilt my head in his direction. He's lounging on a sofa, two girls fighting for his attention like vapid animals.

He doesn't push them away, but he's not focused on them either. He tilts his head on his closed fist, listening to Gareth speak about fuck knows what.

Probably something boring.

But Jeremy doesn't appear bored—I'll give him that. And that says something, considering he finds life more dull than I do.

"Let's go!" Nikolai drags me to them, and this time, I wrench myself from his grip so hard, he nearly crashes to the ground.

My cousin doesn't seem to care about that as he dives in between the two girls and they shriek with delight. Seeming to have realized Jeremy won't be paying them any attention for the next century, they switch to Nikolai's lap.

I stalk behind Gareth and lean over to whisper in his ear, "Hi, big bro. If I didn't know better, I'd say you're avoiding me."

He stiffens, but his expression doesn't change.

I guess living with me for nineteen years has taught him a thing or two. But I'm sure the two or so years he lived before I came along were probably the happiest of his entire life.

We might be siblings, but we couldn't look any more different. He has lighter hair like our mom and his eyes are a carbon copy of Dad's green ones.

Where I'm muscular, he's leaner, built like your next door neighbor or the college professor girls—and boys—can't stop

simping for.

The good boy Gareth.

The golden member and the future of the Carson family Gareth.

Pathetic, neurotypical Gareth.

"You'd have to be important for me to go out of my way and try to avoid you," he says low enough for me to hear, then turns to Jeremy. "As I was saying, if they start talking, you'll be the first one to be roped into this."

"Have you enjoyed your car's new headlights enough?" I change the subject, then whisper, "Because they might disappear. With the whole car. While you sleep."

"Cameras are your worst enemy, Kill," he tells me with a masked smile.

"Maybe they can..." I make a 'whoosh' sound. "Vanish, too."

"The files that are instantly uploaded to my cloud, that could accidentally find their way to Mom's inbox, will not."

"*Oh no, Kill stole my toy, Mom,*" I say, then drop the mocking tone. "What are you? Six years old?"

"Make it three years old, because those files might *accidentally* drop in Dad's and Grandpa's inboxes, too."

"And you have it in your good little heart to shatter the image they formed about their exemplary Killian? You don't want to lose sleep over it, do you? It'll hurt at night." I tap the side of his temple. "Over here. And we don't want you to start beating yourself up over their mental state, now, do we?"

"Vandalize my car and we'll see how far this will go."

"Tell you what, big bro. How about I keep the vandalizing suggestion to myself for the time being? Now that I think about it, there are more critical parts than mere headlights that can be tampered with."

He finally glares at me, his lips pursing, and I grin, slapping him on the shoulder. "Just kidding." Then I whisper, "Or not. Don't provoke me again."

Jeremy—who's been watching the whole exchange without a change in his demeanor—decides to pick up where Gareth left off with him. "No one will dare go against me, and if they do, they'll be taken care of."

"Did I hear the words *taken care of*?" Nikolai emerges from between one of the girl's tits, licking his lips. "Who do we need to take care of? Didn't I say I want to be in on all the fun?"

Gareth pours himself a glass of whiskey. "Two juniors who are spouting rumors about the first initiation from a few weeks ago. They're even tattling to Serpents."

"Oh?" Nikolai's eyes gleam as he absentmindedly pinches the girl's nipple over her camisole. "Let me in, Jer. I'll put the fear of God in their souls."

"What if they're not scared?" I fetch a cigarette, lean against Gareth's chair, and light it. "You can't punish or threaten someone who's not familiar with the concept of fear."

Jeremy raises a brow, swirling the contents of his drink as he watches me. "What do you suggest?"

"Find their Achilles' heel and exploit it. If they don't have one, fabricate it and make them believe it's real." I blow a cloud of smoke over Gareth's head. "I'm sure our fixer here will be able to gather enough intel to help you out. Unless he's too frightened to get his precious hands dirty."

"You little—" Gareth starts, but I cut him off.

"What? You don't want to help Jeremy uphold the club's power? I thought you were friends."

"Enough, Kill." Jeremy points his drink to his left. "Niko will take care of it."

I tsk through a puff of smoke.

"Hell to the fucking yeah." Nikolai rubs his nose. "Violence, baby."

"You don't have to resort to violence," Gareth says with the tone of a pacifist moron.

"Usually, the threat of it is enough," I finish for him.

"We're doing this my way, motherfuckers." Nikolai spans a girl's ass, making her yelp. "Get some front-row seats to watch and learn."

Gareth tips his head in his direction. "Try not to provoke the Serpents while you're at it."

"Not possible."

"They're part of the Bratva, too. If blood spills, you and Jeremy will be held accountable by your parents."

"That's where you're wrong." Jeremy takes a sip of his drink. "Serpents might be part of the same organization, but their fathers are our parents' rivals in the race for power. One day, they will take the reins, so they're trying to squash us before we take over the empire."

"Which is why they're putting all their effort into these little provocations that are a camouflage for a bigger scheme." I flop down beside Nikolai and take a pull on my cigarette.

"Exactly," Jeremy agrees. "We can't let our guard down."

The girl who did a world tour from Jeremy's to Nikolai's lap inches toward me on all fours with the desperation of a cougar in heat.

Her eyes blaze and she's probably drunk or high, or both, considering her extremely dilated pupils.

She lets her dark hair fall over her face, a real imitation of that horror movie where a girl comes out of a well. Even her movements match that ghost.

I grab her by the hair and drag her between my legs. She gasps, but then giggles, snorts, and releases all sorts of annoying noises that should be enough ammo to ban her from breathing.

My fingers dig into her skull, then her jaw. "Open."

She does obediently, revealing a tongue piercing.

It's not the same mouth that was so full with my cum that she spat it all over my designer shoes while glaring and shaking.

The shaking is important, because even though she was clearly terrified and completely out of her element, she still scowled at me.

Still spat my cum out as if it wasn't worthy of being in her stomach.

For that reason alone, I'm tempted to fill all her holes with that cum.

And now, I'm hard.

Fuck. When did I start to have such little control over my libido?

The answer is obviously three days ago.

Three fucking days since my visit to the cliff where I thought I could find some answers.

I found something much better.

The answer behind the answer.

Glyndon King.

I throw the ghost girl away, stub the cigarette on her Gucci bag, and stand.

Jeremy stares up at me. "Aren't you going to stay around and plan the last details of the next initiation?"

"You do it this time."

"Killer, you fake strategist!" Nikolai points a finger at me, giving zero fucks about the girl who's orgasming in his arms. "Didn't you say no one can top you, because your plans are the best?"

"They are."

"Then give us one."

"Jeremy already knows all about it, and I'm not interested in repeating myself. Call me when the actual fun happens."

"You're really leaving, Satan's heir? The fun is just starting."

"Some of us actually study, Niko. Med student, remember?"

"Bullshit. You're a genius."

"Still need to put in some effort." Not really, but it makes society feel better to know everyone is human and suffers just like them.

I slap Gareth on the shoulder. "Stay boring, big bro."

He flips me off and I smile as I slip out of the main party and head downstairs. The basement is soundproofed, so all the music and fuckery eventually disappears as I lock the door behind me.

The red room comes into focus and I stand at the entrance, staring at the attempts at masterpieces I've tried over the years.

My first picture of those mice was taken with a Polaroid camera. I had to commemorate the moment of seeing into a living being's insides.

My second was Gareth when he hit his knee, bled all over the garden, and tried so hard not to cry.

The third was Gareth being attacked by a dog. Ever since then, he's never really gone near one again. If he rationalized the fact that the dog who bit him was sick and probably rabid, he wouldn't have to be so wary of them anymore. But I learned early on that other people's responses to threatening, dangerous situations are vastly different from mine.

Where I stay collected, they panic.

Where I search for a solution, they let fear overwhelm them.

Over the years, I've taken a lot of pictures. Some are gory. Others, not so much. But they usually highlight some form of suffering.

Some form of...human weakness.

At first, I took them to understand how their reactions to certain situations differ from mine. Then I enjoyed the knowledge that I hold a part of them no one has access to.

Not even them.

That's why they're masterpieces.

I've preserved them so well over the years, not allowing anyone to see this part of me.

They don't even know I've chosen medicine just so I can continue my fixation with seeing inside a living being without killing them.

It's more of a challenge this way, but I get to remain hiding in plain sight and even be called noble for...saving lives.

I walk to the latest addition to my collection and pull it from between all the others.

My fingers run over the contours of her soft features splashed with tears, snot, and cum. I can still feel my fingers between her lips instead of seeing them.

That is the first time I've had such a strong release without my permission. I usually go to great lengths and extreme fetishes to release a sliver of what this clueless girl achieved without even trying.

And that pisses me the fuck off.

She's supposed to be a mere thread whose sole purpose was to provide answers, and had no business shooting for a higher position.

As unfortunate as it might sound, I might have to break her for it.

Because I meant it yesterday. I still haven't figured out what exactly I'll do with her.

What's for sure is that I'm going to recreate this look on her face. Again and again.

And fucking again.

One taste isn't enough, after all.

It started with an investigation into Devlin's death, but maybe that's not as important as I initially thought.

GLYNDON

"Tell me why we're here again?" I wince at the loud sound of rap music, chattering, and people.

So many people.

"Because we stan violence, duh." Ava cheers while swaying to the music.

"You know, this unorthodox fascination with male violence could be a manifestation of unpleasant tendencies." Cecily slides her glasses over her nose. "It's kind of toxic."

"Call me queen of toxicity then, because I get to stare at this divine beauty." Ava nudges Annika. "Isn't that right, Anni?"

She fidgets, watching the crowd surrounding us as if they're aliens out to kidnap and enslave us. Like Cecily and me, she wasn't keen on coming to the fighting ring, but democracy doesn't win with Ava.

Besides, despite Ces's psychological profiling just now, she wasn't vehemently against it when the idea first popped up.

It's good to get some air and change the scenery, is what she told me before the three of them dragged me to this underground fighting ring downtown.

And surprise, most of the fighting happens between our university and The King's U.

It goes without saying that we're rivals in every way. Each university encourages its students to take part in clubs, sports, and contests just so they can beat the other university.

Aside from the official sports such as football, basketball, and lacrosse, there's this ongoing tradition of a neutral ground fight

club where a championship is held.

It's basically a gambling den about who gets to win in fistfights. Rumor has it, the chancellors know it's going on and not only turn a blind eye, but they even bet on the championship.

The club is packed as hell, despite the fact that tonight is a normal fighting day where people get matched up randomly. On championship nights, both campuses pour into here like ants.

We're currently waiting for the highlight of the evening—a match between two of the strongest fighters from our unis. The fighter from our side is Creigh, who's having his shoulders massaged by Remi on the pedestal above.

While Remi is the captain of the basketball team and Bran is the captain of the Lacrosse team, they never fight.

When we asked Remi why he doesn't, he snorted and laughed *and* mocked us. "Preposterous! Me? A fight? As in, putting my lordship's nose in jeopardy? You're out of your mind, you're out of your mind, and everyone is out of their fucking mind!"

The hypocrite is totally fine with thrusting that preposterous act onto Creigh, though.

I really wish my cousin didn't have such a strong inclination to violence. He could've been a silent nerd, but he chose to be a silent brute.

While I'm still watching Remi and Creigh, two tall guys stroll to their sides. The first is none other than my brother, Landon, dressed in shorts and a jersey—probably ready to fight.

Everyone in the School of Arts & Music avoids any manifestation of violence, and some even ditch sports altogether, to protect our hands.

But not my deranged brother.

He loves to draw blood with the same hands that sculpt masterpieces.

Life can be unfair like that by choosing to bestow boundless talent to undeserving people.

I love my brother, *sometimes*, but he's not a decent human being.

Not even close.

The one accompanying him, however, is a surprise. My oldest cousin, Eli, Creigh's brother, matches Lan's nonchalant aura like a

king waltzing to his throne.

Eli keeps a profile so low that my attempts seem amateurish in comparison. Even though he's studying for his PhD at REU, we barely see him.

If ever.

No one even knows where he is at all times. So when Grandpa asks about how his eldest grandchild is doing, I give the most generic answer because my knowledge about Eli's state is no different from his.

So to see him here tonight is as rare as a unicorn.

I nudge Ava, but in reality, I don't need to.

My friend is already staring in his direction—or more like glaring. I've known Ava since we were in nappies, and nothing is able to completely wipe her good mood like Eli's presence.

"And what is he doing here?" she grits out.

"Showing his support to Creigh?" I try, always playing the middle ground between my otherworldly side of the family and my friends.

"Support, my arse. If he and that word met on the top of a volcano, it'd free fall to lava. He's just here to ruin everyone's evening."

"Only if you let him," Cecily touches her arm. She's the best pacifist ever, I swear. I wish I had Ces's way of making everything seem okay.

"Right." Ava releases a breath. "Besides, Lan is here, too, and Glyn is fine with it."

"I'm not scared of him." *Lie*. But they don't need to know that.

Also, I've come to learn the hard way that there are worse things than my brother. At least he wasn't actively trying to destroy me.

"That's the spirit, bitch." Ava bumps her shoulder with mine. "Fuck the boys."

"Very classy." Cecily rolls her eyes. "You're supposed to be the granddaughter of the former prime minister."

"Don't be a prude. And Grandpa encourages my need to express myself, thank you very much."

"Umm." Annika shifts from foot to foot. "We should probably go before the start of the fight."

"What? No, we're here for the fight and to cheer on Creigh. We can't just leave." Ava cups her mouth and screams, "You've got this, Cray Cray!"

He merely stares in our direction while Remi waves and shows off Creighton's muscles.

Landon is focused on his phone, completely oblivious to his surroundings. Eli, who was drinking from a bottle of water, pauses and tilts his head in our direction.

Or more like in Ava's.

No words are spoken, but it's like they're having a silent war. Ava and Eli always had the weirdest relationship that I can't put a name to.

One thing's for certain, though. It's always been filled with some sort of tension.

She tries to maintain eye contact, but despite the fact that she's the strongest, most outspoken person I know, she's no match for Eli's hurricane-like energy. She huffs, flips her hair, and switches her attention to our new friend. "As I was saying, dear Anni, we're here to stay."

"Jer will have my neck if he sees me here."

"You're a big girl," Cecily says. "He doesn't tell you what to do."

"That's right." Ava holds her in a half-hug and they look like princesses with Ava's lace pink dress and Annika's purple tulle skirt. "We've got you, girl."

"You...you're right." She digs her heels in the ground and smiles. "Jer can't do anything to me."

"Sure about that, Anoushka?"

Annika and I freeze for two different reasons. She, because that voice that spoke from behind us is definitely her brother's.

The notorious Jeremy Volkov, who's rumored to be a killer in the making.

Me?

An amber-woody scent takes me hostage, and I want to think it's a play of my imagination, as was the case for the last week.

Ever since he cornered me near the library a week ago, I've been looking over my shoulder, checking my locks, and searching my surroundings.

He's put me in a hyperaware mode against my own will, and I've tried to conquer it by painting, jogging, and letting Ava take me anywhere she wants.

None of that has worked.

And I'm starting to think it was a psychological trick. He specifically told me he's coming back just to keep me on the edge, so even if he's not physically tormenting me, the mental impact does the job.

Every time I've tried to push him out of my head, he barges into my subconscious with the persistent lethality of poison.

Which is why I hope now is one of those moments where I'm being paranoid for no reason. That I just need to take a pill and go to sleep.

But when I turn around, my eyes clash with those monstrous ones. He's standing beside a man who's about his height, has thick dark brows, and is wearing a closed-off expression, as if he's offended with the world itself.

It must be Jeremy.

Despite his infamous reputation of maiming people for sport, it's not him that I can't stop staring at.

It's the asshole by his side in his black shirt and black trousers and trainers. He's dressed so casually but still reeks of corruption, like a power-hungry politician or a bloodthirsty warlord.

He still looks tenfold worse than his charming appearance.

Or maybe it's because, unlike all the people present, I'm well aware of what this devil is capable of.

I automatically take a step back and his lips tilt in a small smirk.

That's the thing.

The freaking psycho enjoys driving me to the edge.

Hell, he gets off on it.

"Oh, hi, Jer," Annika stumbles over her words. "I didn't really mean to come here. I was just taking a tour with my new friends."

"Taking a tour in a place you're not supposed to be?" Jeremy speaks with effortless power, accentuated by a raised brow.

"I was just—"

"Leaving," he finishes for her. "Now."

"Hey." Cecily steps in front of her. "She can decide whether to leave or stay on her own because oh, I think we're at an age where women don't get told what to do."

Jeremy stares down at her blankly, as if he's contemplating whether or not he should crush her with a hand or two.

I love Cecily's bravery—I do—but some people are just not worth risking your life to oppose. Jeremy is at the top of that list.

Annika seems to know that, too, because she subtly pushes Cecily away. "It's okay. I'll go back."

My friend, who obviously has multiple death wishes, shoos her with a hand. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

"I want to, *really*." Annika shakes her head and whispers, "It's not worth it."

"Walk in front of me, Anoushka."

Annika bows her head and murmurs, "I'm sorry."

Then she follows her brother's command. They're not two steps away before Cecily fumes, "That bloody misogynistic pig is simply not going to dictate Anni's life."

And then my crazy friend follows them.

"I swear to fuck, she's suicidal," Ava whispers, then yells, "Wait for me, Ces!"

No, no...

I don't spare a glance at who I'm left with and attempt to follow after them—girls standing up for girls and all that. Truth is, I'd rather face Jeremy than his psychotic friend.

My head crashes into a wall of muscles and I step backward in shock.

A hand wraps around my elbow, seemingly gentle yet anything but. "Where do you think you're going?"

I try to pull my elbow free, but he only tightens his hold as a warning.

My gaze strays sideways, hoping to catch the attention of someone familiar, but all the faces have turned blurry, featureless, even.

"It's useless to find refuge in anyone but me, baby."

"Screw you. I'm not your baby."

His free hand reaches out for me and I freeze, thinking he'll choke me again.

Images of him sneaking into my nightmare, strangling me, then doing unspeakable things to me come crashing down. I don't want to think about my state when I woke up or where my hand was.

It's like the time I stroked my neck as I stared at that damn painting I somehow couldn't vandalize.

However, his fingers seep into my hair gently, lovingly. "Did I mention that your fight is adorable? The way your beautiful eyes war with both fear and determination is a turn-on. I wonder if this is the look I'll see when you're writhing underneath me as I stuff your cunt with my cock."

My lips tremble. I'm still not used to the way he speaks so dirty so casually, but I say, "The only thing you'll see is your blood as I stab you to death."

"I don't mind. Red happens to be my favorite color." He tips his chin at the red patterns on my shirt. "Your style is cute."

I don't want to be cute to this bastard. I don't want to be anything to him, because his attention?

It's suffocating.

The only thing I breathe, see, or feel is him. The intoxicating scent, the intimidating physique, and the haunting presence.

"I've been thinking," he muses, still stroking his fingers in my hair with no warmth whatsoever. "Aren't you going to ask what I've been thinking about?"

"Not interested."

"See, that's where you do things wrong, Glyndon. If you continue antagonizing me for sport, you'll only get yourself cut." His tone holds no threat, not an obvious one, anyway. "As I was saying, I've been thinking about the best way to have your lips around my cock again. Are you game?"

"To bite your dick off for real this time? Sure."

He chuckles, the sound soft, but his touch in my hair is anything but. "Careful. I'm allowing you to push, but don't mistake my tolerance for acceptance. I'm not a generous man."

"Shocker."

"Your stubbornness can be grating, but we'll smooth it out." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "Go out with me for a ride."

I stare at him, eyes big, waiting for him to laugh.

He doesn't.

"Are you serious?"

"Do I seem like the joking type?"

"No, but you must be the delusional type if you think I'll go anywhere with you."

"Willingly."

"What?"

"You won't go anywhere with me *willingly*. But I can find ways to drag you out of here and no one will see you."

"My brother and cousins are up there," I hiss, searching for them with my gaze.

Come on, Lan, even your craziness is welcome right now.

"They won't see either," he says casually. "If I choose to, no one will hear of you again and you'll be a measly statistic."

A shudder slashes down my spine because I know, I just know this is no joking matter to him and that if he chooses to, he could and would definitely keep his word.

"Stop it," I whisper.

"I might consider that when you do what I asked for earlier and go on a ride with me."

"So you have the green light to do as you threatened? If you actually kidnap me, no one will be the wiser since I went with you on my own feet."

"That's true, but I promise to return you safely."

"Excuse me for not believing you."

"Hmm." He strokes the lobe of my ear, back and forth like an eerie lullaby. "What would make you believe me?"

"Nothing." I breathe harshly, partly because of being in his presence and the fact that he won't stop freaking touching me. I don't react well to my sensory world and it shows. "I don't trust you and never will."

"As I said, never say never." His eyes hold mine hostage for a second, two, and I swear I'm going to catch fire by the third. "How about I prove that I keep my word?"

"How the hell would you do that?"

"I'll win this upcoming match for you."

"Oh, so you'll beat up Creigh—who happens to be my cousin—to prove a point. What a classic *you* move."

"I'll lose it then," he says without blinking. "I'll get beaten up to prove a point."

My lips fall open, but I quickly recuperate. "I don't want that."

"That's what you'll get." He brushes my hair again. "And you'll watch every moment of it, baby. If you dare leave, I'll send that cousin of yours into a coma."

"You...wouldn't."

"Try me."

"Why the hell are you doing all of this? Are you...insane?"

"Maybe. After all, insanity, evil, and ruthlessness are boundless and lawless. I'd rather be insane than an ordinary fool." He leans over and my heart stops beating for a fraction of a second as he kisses the top of my head slowly, gently. "Wait for me, baby."

And then his touch is gone, and so are the remnants of my fragile sanity.

I can only watch as he rushes through the crowd and heads to the middle of the ring.

GLYNDON

This is crazy.

He's crazy.

I've been well aware of that fact since the first time I met him, but I'm one hundred percent sure now. There's no doubt about his psychosis.

My fingers clench and I slide them against my shorts, then fish out my phone and tap the number called 'Emergency.'

It rings once. Twice.

And then he picks up with a half-sleeping voice. "Hello? Glyndon?" The older male voice speaks with its usual warmth. "Are you there?"

"Um, yeah. Sorry if I woke you up."

"No, I was just watching TV and dozed off. Where are you? It sounds noisy."

"I'm outside with friends." I kick an imaginary pebble. "It's coming back, Dr. Ferrell. I can't... I can't control it anymore."

"That's okay. Breathe." His voice sobers up, sounding soothing like that first time Mum took me to him at my request.

Ever since my early teens, I suffered with a huge inferiority complex and I couldn't survive in our household without the need to do something nefarious.

It didn't matter how much my parents tried to talk to me, I always found a way to escape into my own head and block them out.

Which is where Dr. Ferrell came in. I was too hesitant to talk to my family, but I could pour my heart out to a professional. He

taught me how to recognize when I'm overwhelmed, to talk about it instead of burying it, to paint it instead of letting it rip me from the inside out.

But I don't have my brush and canvas now, so I could only call him. This late. Like a creep.

"What made it come back?" he asks after a moment.

"I don't know. Everything?"

"Does this concern Devlin?"

"Yes and no. I don't like people living their lives as if Devlin was never a part of it. I don't like how they tiptoe around his name as if he was never there, or how they're even starting rumors about his weird tendencies. I was his only friend, I knew him best, I could defend him best, but the moment I want to talk, my tongue gets tied up and I start hyperventilating. I hate it, *this, them*, the fact that they erased him as if he never existed." A tear cascades down my cheek. "He said it would happen, that he and I would be forgotten, and I think...maybe...maybe that's true."

"We agreed not to go there, Glyndon. Devlin was loved by you and he's remembered by you."

"But that's not enough."

"I'm sure it is for him."

A long breath whooshes out of me, letting his words sink in. Right. The world never understood Dev, so why should he be remembered by them?

I'm enough.

"Can you tell me the reason behind the trigger of your emotions?"

I rub my palm against my shorts and stare at the crowd where that psycho disappeared. He's not even in sight anymore, and yet, he's, without doubt, the reason every stone I carefully laid inside me is tumbling down.

Or at least, he's the drop that made the cup overflow.

But I can't tell Dr. Ferrell about that, because he'll read into everything prior to tonight, and I'm just not ready to let it all out.

Maybe he'll judge me for keeping it a secret.

Maybe he'll know the actual reason why I'm keeping it a secret.

So I change direction. "I got a weird text."

"Of what nature?"

"Someone who keeps telling me that I should've had the same fate as Dev and to watch my back."

"Did their tone sound threatening?"

"It's weird, but no. I guess my feelings are all over the place if I don't see what they said as threatening."

"You have every right to be that way. Don't beat yourself up for it. And if those texts change in nature, promise you'll let me know and report it."

"I promise."

The crowd buzzes with energy, some people jumping up and down to get a view of the ring.

"I gotta go, Dr. Ferrell. And thanks for listening to me."

"Anytime."

I hang up absentmindedly as I focus on the uproar of the crowd.

The students from REU go crazy as Creigh jumps into the ring. He's wearing white shorts, no shirt, and his hands are wrapped in bandages.

"Go get 'em, spawn!" Remi shouts from the sidelines. "Show them what my lordship raised."

Landon gives our cousin an 'I'm watching you' look from the booth above, most likely telling him that he bet on him. He's surrounded by a few guys and girls, probably from his stupid club, Elites.

Eli is nowhere to be found, though.

My eyes automatically slip to the other side. On the sidelines stands a huge, heavily intimidating tattooed guy who I think is rumored to run in the same circles as Jeremy. He's wearing a flashy black satin robe and jumping in place as he punches the air.

I frown. I thought Killian was going to fight Creigh, not someone else. But maybe he changed his mind, after all.

It's impossible to imagine someone like him willingly losing anything anyway.

"Phew! I didn't miss the big fight." Ava slides in beside me, pushing a few rebel blonde hairs away from her eyes.

I search behind her. "Where's Ces?"

"With Annika in obligatory confinement at the dormitory. She didn't have to stay with her, but she was like, fuck Jeremy—I know, she really wants to die young—and kept Anni company." Ava exhales. "That chap is scary as fuck and he doesn't have to talk to relay it. Just his icy stare is enough. He even has guards and full-on security on freaking campus. I didn't believe Anni could be anything but the prettiest doll alive, but she's a mafia princess, after all."

"Are you sure they'll be okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. He won't actually hurt his sister. He's just being overprotective."

"Cecily isn't his sister, though."

"No, but she has balls bigger than his guards. Don't worry about her." She throws up a dismissive hand. "Now, what did I miss?"

"The other player is about to get in." I tilt my head toward the one covered with a satin robe.

"O.M.G. Nikolai Sokolov?"

"You know him?"

"Everyone on campus but you does." She rolls her eyes. "I have to educate you on everything, I swear. What would you do without me?"

"Flounder in ignorance?"

"Exactly. So you should be thankful. Listen up. So Nikolai is one of the Heathens' founding members and The King's U's rulers. See all those muscles and tattoos? They're real. This is where you can judge a book by its cover, because Nikolai has an infamous knack for violence. All those bodies that are rumored to have been thrown in the sea? He's the one who chopped them up. You know how Jeremy is called The Overlord? Nikolai is The Punisher. He's like their human weapon."

My blood goes icy. The more I hear about the Heathens, the more I dislike them. "And should Creigh fight a human weapon?"

"He'll be fine. Cray Cray is a tough devil and our reigning champion. No human weapon will stop him."

"Still, that guy looks thirsty for blood."

"That's because he is." She searches her surroundings, then leans over and whispers, "He's in the mafia, too. Like Jeremy."

"Really?"

"Totally. Like, you know, even his name, Nikolai Sokolov, is actually the same as his great-grandfather who was the founder and ruler of the New York Bratva. And now, both his parents are leaders there. He and Jeremy are ruthless mobsters in the making."

"And how do you know all of this?" I don't know why I whisper back.

"Everyone does." She pulls away. "And Anni gave me inside intel because she's sweet like that and she's been around them her whole life. So I'm like an expert on The King's U's inner circle now—or more like the Heathens. Serpents are a mystery."

"And that's something to be proud of?"

"Of course. You have to form interpersonal relationships because you never know when you'll need them. Look." She jerks her chin in the direction of a man who's talking to Nikolai. He's wearing a button-down and black trousers, appearing like he's straight out of a formal photoshoot.

"That one is Gareth Carson, The Fixer, in their club. You know, the one who stops shit from hitting the fan with authorities or the chancellor. He's studying law and will probably be cleaning up all of their criminal messes one day."

"He...looks familiar."

"That's because he's Killian's older brother."

I choke on my spit and must be staring at her like a dead fish, since Ava shakes my shoulder, then waves in front of my eyes. "Hi, hello? Are you there? I swear you bitches will be the death of me. One is a mafia princess, the other is suicidal, and this one lags."

"That's rude. And I'm here."

"You just froze up, Glyn. Blimey. Get it together. It's a given in the girls' honor book that no boy should have that much hold on you by the mere mention of his name. Come on, my pride as your mentor is at stake here."

"He has no freaking hold on me."

"Yeah, right. Totally believe you and your rosy cheeks." She sighs. "But Anni is right. We chatted more about Killian and I even did some research, and the boy is probably trouble. And by

probably, I mean definitely. He's so squeaky clean on the outside that it screams skeletons in the closet."

I let my gaze linger on Gareth. He appears composed, handsome in a regal kind of way, and like someone with enough charisma to demand attention. But so does his brother. Maybe that whole family is screwed up.

After all, anyone who willingly gets involved with the mafia must be twisted in a way.

Nikolai is about to step into the ring when a shadow appears from behind him and taps his shoulder.

My hands shake, turning hot and sweaty as the scene slowly plays out in front of me.

Killian is only wearing red shorts. His hands are wrapped in white bandages that extend to above his wrists.

Some people are beautiful, and some are hot, but then there's Killian's body that's the personification of masculine perfection.

I figured he was muscular from whenever he thought it was fun to trap me against him, but my imagination couldn't have prepared me for the real thing.

His chest ripples with every move, his abs slick and carefully built to add to his physical superiority. Tattoos of small black birds fly from his side to his chest. No, not birds, ravens. Some of them have broken wings that disintegrate in a stunning image. The shorts hang low on his hips over a defined V-line that leaves nothing to the imagination.

I don't want to think where that line leads to, but I can't help the explicit images that overcrowd my brain.

No.

Get out of my head.

Is this what's called conditioning? Shouldn't I feel traumatized instead of...eroticizing it?

The view in front of me isn't helping, though. Killian's biceps and forearms bulge with muscles and veins as if his blood can't be internally contained.

Maybe there's a machine where his heart is supposed to be, after all.

Even I can't deny that he scores high on physical perfection. But all monsters look beautiful from afar. It's up close that the

ugliness shows.

It's up close that the need to run becomes a need to survive.

Still, it's unfair that he was bestowed with a weapon to use in his predatory gains. If he was a bit ugly or had a micro dick, people would stay away.

No, I'm not going to think about his dick again. I simply am not.

"The Strategist," Ava says from beside me and I startle.

I...actually forgot she was there during my hyperfocus on the nightmare in the form of a man.

"That's what Killian is called," Ava explains. "Because he's like the mastermind behind their every operation and the initiation of members into their club."

"What do you know about their club?"

"Aside from their rivalry with the Elites and the Serpents? Not much. Even Anni was super hush-hush about it, which makes me even more curious. I heard it's like they're recruiting soldiers for their future arsenal. But here's the catch, there's only one way in which you can enter the mafia." Her voice lowers to a haunting whisper. "By spilling blood."

A shudder rips through me and I have to swallow a few times as I track Killian's movements. That bastard isn't only crazy, but he's ruthless and remorseless, too. The worst combination to ever exist.

He speaks a few words to Nikolai and the latter's brow furrows. I don't miss how Gareth takes a step back and crosses his arms.

His calm demeanor from earlier is long gone and it's clear that he's suppressing tension. I know because that's how Bran and I must look whenever Lan is around.

My lips part when I become hyperaware of the similarities between us. Is he...also scared of his brother?

After some words are exchanged between Killian and Nikolai, the one in the satin robe glares, but he steps back.

And just like that, Killian heads to the ring. The announcer is baffled for a second, but then he shouts, "There's a change from The King's U's side. Killian will be the one to play against Creighton!"

The people in the other uni's crowd nearly scream their heads off. They go so crazy, I'm surprised my eardrums don't explode. On the other hand, a deadpan silence goes through our crowd.

"Why the hell is he the one playing?" Ava whispers.

Because of me. But I don't say that and attempt to play dumb. "Isn't he a better option than The Punisher?"

"Hey, Nikolai's violence is playful in these types of fights. Killian's is deadly. He was almost locked up for nearly killing a guy last year. No one has wanted to go against him since then, except for maybe the crazy Nikolai." She shakes her head. "Killian has been watching from the sidelines for months. The only reason Creigh won the championship last year is because Killian walked out on another adversary mid-match. When a girl asked him why he retreated, he was like. 'Oh, that? I got bored and remembered I would rather be sleeping.' I know. He's *that* crazy."

My limbs shake at the realization of the big trouble my cousin could be in because of me. "Let's...get Creigh out of there."

Because hell no, I don't believe Killian will lose on purpose. He's not built to lose, definitely not to prove to me or to anyone else anything.

"Bitch, please. You think Creigh will obediently follow? Look at his eyes." She jerks a thumb in my cousin's direction. "He's fired up for this. He was looking forward to fighting Killian last year and felt robbed when it wasn't him who got to the final round."

"We need to stop him, Ava. His ego doesn't matter compared to his life."

"Too late," she lets out in a whisper.

I watch in horror as the referee gives the go sign. The crowd cheers louder as Creigh and Killian circle each other.

The freaking psycho smirks and says something I don't hear. Creigh's expression doesn't change, but he lunges forward, Killian ducks and punches him so hard across the face, blood explodes from my cousin's mouth. He doesn't even recuperate before Killian punches him again, sending him half flying over the ring.

I shriek in the middle of our crowd's "Ahh."

The King's U's students all chant, "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

I think I'm going to throw up.

My stomach clamps and I wrap an arm around it to stop from retching.

"What the fuck, what the actual fuck!" Remi screams at the top of his lungs, gripping the railings. "Don't just stand there, Creigh. Show them what you got, spawn!"

My cousin doesn't bother wiping the blood from his face as he lunges again. Killian tries to evade, but Creigh grabs him in a chokehold and tackles him. Our side goes crazy and Ava jumps up and down. "Yes!!! Cray Cray, get him!"

Before Killian can hit the floor, he bounces back with a punch, but Creigh jumps to the side at the last second, which makes our crowd cheer louder. "King! King! King!"

The match becomes more intense and cutthroat with each passing second.

Killian and Creighton throw punches at each other over and over, and neither of them seems to be backing down.

I clearly remember that freaking bastard saying he'd be losing. Is bloodying my cousin's face called losing?

"Go, Creigh!" I shout at the top of my lungs with Ava.

I could've sworn that my voice is unable to be heard in the middle of all the surrounding noise, but Killian's head cocks in my direction for the first time since he left my side.

His eyes are muted, no light whatsoever in their depths, but there's something more.

It's almost as if he's...angry.

Creigh uses that second of distraction to pummel him. I wince as Killian's face flies downward then sideways with the successive punches.

But before my cousin can get the momentum, Killian kicks him away, and as Creigh regains his balance, the other corners him and punches him. Over.

And over.

And over.

Creigh tries to hold his arms up, but there's no stopping the murderous energy that radiates off the psycho.

I'll send him into a coma.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!" The crowd cheers at the top of their lungs.

"Tap out," I whisper as if Creigh can hear me. "Just tap out."

"He won't," Ava sounds as spooked as I am. "You know he'd rather die than tap out."

Even Remi is shouting and cursing at him to tap out, but it's like he's not hearing anyone.

No, no.

He'll really murder him at this rate.

"Kill! Kill! Kill!"

Shut up.

Shut up.

All of you shut the hell up.

"Killian!" I scream, not even sure what I'm trying to say.

Ava wraps a hand around my mouth. "What the hell are you doing? Want to get us killed by REU's students or something? Cheering for the enemy is a sad way to die, Glyn."

My shout gets Killian's attention, though, because he stares at me over his shoulder. Creigh uses the chance to push him off and he's the one with the momentum now.

He punches Killian with a ferocity of a resurrected phoenix. His blows are so powerful that Killian steps back with each one. He doesn't attempt to defend his face.

Or his hands.

Damn it. Isn't he supposed to be a med student? Their hands are as important to them as they are to us.

Our crowd goes nuts, while The King's U's students boo.

Nikolai jumps up and punches the air with a swish of his satin robe, obviously displeased with the turn of events. Gareth watches with a furrowed brow and his hands in his pockets. Instead of looking worried, he appears more suspicious.

He's probably thinking it's weird that his brother is losing.

With his reputation, no one would believe this scenario.

Even I am unable to wrap my mind around it.

My stomach knots as I watch him being beaten to a pulp.

What the hell is he?

Just what the hell is inside that rotten brain of his?

"Stop it," I whisper. "Stop it, you psycho."

I'm not like him or anyone here. I don't like witnessing violence.

Even if a monster is on the receiving end.

People around me start wincing at how brutal Creigh's blows are. Some girls even look to be on the verge of vomiting.

Then, in the middle of all the noise, cheering, booing, and utter chaos, Killian reaches out for Creigh's face and taps. Twice.

The crowd is stunned to silence, and then ours roars at the news of victory. But some release a breath of relief.

Nikolai curses, Remi curses, and even the announcer curses.

"Damn. That's the end of that, ladies and gents. The King wins!"

Killian turns with ease, even though his whole body is bruised.

Creigh grabs him by the arm. "Don't fucking tap out. Let's continue."

"If we continue, I'll kill you." He levels him with a glare. "Back. Off."

Creigh seems bent on his decision, but I'm thankful for Remi, who grabs him and forces him to calm all that excessive adrenaline.

My heart hammers as Killian slips from the ring. I don't wait for him to come and find me, so I mumble an intelligible "I gotta go" to Ava, then bolt out of there.

Creigh is fine, so that bastard has nothing to threaten me with.

And I sure as hell am not going to stick around to witness his craziness in full glory.

I wrap my sweater around my middle and hasten my footsteps out of the fighting club.

As soon as I'm above ground, I breathe in a harsh intake of air. I'm still shaking and I don't think I can stop that reaction.

It's not until I'm in the car park that I realize we came in Ava's car and unless I'm ready to go back in there, I have no ride.

Whatever, I'll call an Uber.

I'm ready to lay my head on Cecily's lap and let her tell me all sorts of psychological shit just so I can forget.

Or maybe I can paint something.

An engine revs behind me and I step to the side to give way to the car. But it swerves in front of me and I yelp as it comes to a sudden halt.

It's a bright red Aston Martin that appears to be a custom—something my uncle would collect in his motor collection.

The driver's door flings open and a larger-than-life shadow staggers out of it.

My heart stops when he drags his fingers through his hair, his jaw clenching. "Last I checked, we had a ride to go on, didn't we?"

GLYNDON

Red drips onto the concrete.
Dark.

Ominous.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

I follow the direction from which the blood is pouring and pause.

Killian still wears the red shorts and has thrown on a black T-shirt. His muscles flex, but he doesn't appear to be cold, or in pain due to the bruise peeking from his arm or the cut on his lip.

That's from where the blood drips, smearing his chin and collarbone.

"Get in the car," he orders with complete assurance.

Someone honks because the crazy bastard stopped in the middle of the street, but Killian doesn't pay them attention.

I shake my head and try to bypass him.

"I can always go back in there and pick up where I left off. The only difference is that you'll regret the decision once your precious Creighton ends up in a body cast."

My fists clench. "Don't."

"I heard he doesn't tap out. So maybe he'll be hooked to a machine in a hospital next time you see him."

"Stop it!"

"Get in the fucking car, Glyndon."

The guy honks again and while Killian doesn't seem to hear him, the sensory overload nearly drives me up the wall.

"Get out of the way, motherfucker!" the guy screams from the window in an American accent.

Once Killian stares at him, he swallows and reverses, then hits a rubbish can on his escape route.

"You have until the count of three. If you don't get in the car, I'm going back to Creighton."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Three."

The bastard didn't even count.

He slides back into his car, and I don't let my brain think as I throw the passenger door open and get inside.

I'm breathing harshly, my skin crawling and my heart about to leap out of my skin. It isn't normal that I'm on an emotional upheaval whenever I'm in his orbit.

One hand on the steering wheel, the other casually lying by his side, he faces me. "That wasn't so hard."

I glare at him and cross my arms over my chest. "For your information, I still don't trust you. In fact, I distrust you even more now that you proved you're not only prone to violence, but you'd also threaten my family with it."

"All humans are prone to violence. I just have better control over it."

"You don't sound so convincing with blood dripping all over your face."

"Worried about me, baby?"

"You'd be bleeding out and I wouldn't even notice. In fact, I'd use the blood to mix colors on my palette."

"Ouch." His voice drops. "Though you're such a horrible liar. You looked as pale as a ghost when I was being punched."

"I dislike violence, so it's not about you. I would've reacted that way to anyone."

"I choose to believe that you felt especially aggravated because it's me."

"That's called delusional."

"Semantics." He reaches for the glovebox and I push against the leather of the seat.

The squeaking sound fills the interior and I whisper, "What are you doing?"

Killian grabs a tissue and smiles. Or more like smirks. "Don't worry, I won't bite you." He wipes the blood, smudging it all over his mouth further before making it go away. "Yet."

The engine revs and I startle when I'm physically flung back against the seat as he speeds forward. My mind races with endless possibilities about where the hell he's taking me while I fasten my seatbelt and hold on to it for dear life.

Logically, the northern side of the island isn't that big. Aside from the two campuses, there's downtown, shops, a library, and some restaurants and hotspots that the students frequent.

So he can't kidnap and kill me around here.

Still not a reassuring thought, though.

"I figured you'd be a good girl."

My eyes leave the road and focus on him. He motions at my seatbelt that I'm digging my nails in.

"It's for safety."

"Don't worry. I'm an excellent driver."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "I'm sure you are. I bet you're good at everything."

"Pretty much. I'm good at what I'm interested in."

"And what are you interested in?" I sound nonchalant enough that it flies under the radar.

Because I'm changing gears here.

I can't just keep getting blindsided by him and thrown around like a helpless doll. I need to somehow make the first move.

If my previous interactions with Killian are of any indication, then I'm sure he's on the antisocial spectrum. Like Lan—maybe even worse.

Because while he's a beast to the world, my brother chooses to spare us. The keyword being *chooses*. Because Lan can become insufferable when he's bored. It's why we stay away from him—it's just impossible to figure out what goes on in his unpredictable head.

And if Lan is of any indication, then like him, Killian must have an obsession. A stimulus. A need for something to keep his tendencies regulated.

For my brother, it's sculpting. He became a more socially accepted being after focusing on his art. The only time we

voluntarily approach Lan is after he exits his art studio.

It's when he's the most elated, somewhat normal, and even jokes with us.

I choose to think that Lan would never be as subhuman as Killian, though. I choose to think that deep down, my brother cares about our parents and us.

Back at RES, he beat up a bunch of entitled kids who called Bran a fag. He came home bloodied, but those kids had to be admitted to the A&E.

He also slashed the tires of a teacher who called my painting mediocre and told her she had no business judging me when she was a tasteless, talentless piece of rubbish herself.

Bran says Lan only does those things to protect his own image that we're an extension of. But I'm not as pessimistic as he is.

Anyway, I need to figure out what makes Killian tick and try to counter it.

"For now, you."

I swallow at his neutral tone as he keeps his attention on the road. He's speeding, the lights and trees blurring in my peripheral vision, but I'm unable to focus on that right now.

"Why would you be interested in me?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"The fact that we don't know each other? Oh, and you assaulted me the first time we met."

"As I said, I saved you. You should learn to become more grateful."

"That was assault, Killian."

"Call it whatever you like." He tilts his head in my direction, a dark gleam shining in his eyes. "By the way, I like the sound of my name on your lips."

"Then you won't be hearing it anymore."

"You know, defying me every step of the way will only tire you. It could be so much better and easier if you enjoy this and try to free yourself."

"And let me guess, I'll have to give in to your every whim?"

"It's highly recommended."

"I would rather choke to death."

"I can make that happen, but I prefer feeling that wild pulse in your neck."

My palms turn sweaty and I rub them against the sides of my shorts. There's no need to guess if these are casual words or not, because I have no doubt that this psycho would make them come true.

He's really unhinged.

"You should work on quitting that habit." He motions at my palms that are slowly going up and down. "It gives away your discomfort. Or is it anxiety? Maybe nervousness? Or the three combined?"

It hits me then.

If he's like Lan, then he doesn't process emotions like the rest of us. It's not only about a lack of empathy for these guys. They literally don't see emotions through the same lenses as normal people.

Almost every single socially acceptable emotion they have to portray is gradually learned through their environment. Little by little, they perfect their outer image to the point where they're indistinguishable in a crowd.

But if anyone gets close, close enough to see behind the façade, they find out just how dysfunctional, how cardboard they are.

How...lonely they actually get.

Lan has never liked how Bran and I get along—how alike we are—because he can't fit in with us. He thinks he reigns over us, but I've almost always pitied his lone wolf status.

He'll never know how to love properly, laugh properly, experience joy, or even feel pain properly.

He's a mash of molecules, atoms, and matter with complete and utter emptiness for which he needs constant stimuli to keep filled up to the brim.

Like a house of cards, he can scatter at any second.

He'll never live like the rest of us.

And neither will Killian.

I just feel zero sympathy for this bastard.

And that's why I can provoke him.

"Giving away my emotions is my business. At least I have those unlike a certain someone."

"Is this the part where I should act offended? Maybe try to shed a tear or two?"

"Yeah, and look into ways to grow a heart while you're at it."

"The world won't function correctly if all of us are emotional, morally right creatures. There needs to be a balance, or else there'll be chaos."

"Are you kidding me? You guys are the ones who instigate chaos."

"Organized chaos is different from anarchy. I choose to uphold society's standards by reigning over it instead of ruining it." He pauses. "And who are *you guys*?"

I huff but say nothing.

He taps a finger against the steering wheel. "I asked you a question, Glyndon."

"I obviously refuse to answer."

A large hand falls on my bare thigh. The touch is callous and so possessive that my skin erupts in a wild heat.

"As much as I like your fight, there are situations where you should read the atmosphere and not defy me."

I grab his wrist, attempting to remove his hand, but it's like I'm pushing a wall. It's scary how much strength he has and how weak and fragile I feel in his presence.

It's impossible to stop his fingers from sneaking up my skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. There's pure command in the way he touches me with dripping control, as if I'm a conquest he's set on finishing off.

I know the best method to get off his radar is having him get bored of me, and that any resistance on my part will probably flame his interest, but I can't.

I just can't let him have his way with me.

It'll break me this time.

It'll make me drive to that cliff with no chances of coming back.

So I claw at his fingers, my heart hammering faster and harder. "Let me go."

"How else am I going to get an answer for the question I asked?" His fingers slip under the hem of my shorts with expert ease. It doesn't even matter that his other hand is on the steering wheel or that he's driving.

"Don't," I whisper as the pads of his fingers hover close to my underwear. "I'm telling you no, Killian."

"The word no doesn't scare me, baby. *We guys* don't give a fuck about its meaning or the lack thereof. Besides, doesn't no mean yes sometimes?"

"Not this time."

"Debatable." His voice drops to a dangerous rumble. "The thing is, I might not feel emotions the same way everyone else does, but I can understand them in others, oftentimes better than they do. And right now, I can smell your fear mixed with something entirely different. You're terrified I'll repeat what happened at the cliff and confiscate your control, but at the same time, you're buzzing with the possibility, secretly wishing for it." His fingers curl against my knickers and a whimper escapes me. "You're soaking wet for it, baby."

"Don't touch me," my voice breaks and I can't help the shame that coats my words or the tears that fill my eyes.

"You can't entice a predator with prey and ask him to go hungry." His fingers glide against my folds, the weight of his hand forcing my thighs apart despite my attempts to close them. "I bet you were also wet when you were choking on my cock with your life hanging on the edge. Did your little cunt throb and demand to be touched, too? I bet it was getting all drenched and achy. I loved your lips with my cock wrapped around them and cum coating them, but maybe I should've gone for your pussy, too." He reaches a finger beneath my underwear and thrusts it deep inside. "I bet these lips would look even better with my cock tearing into them."

My upper body hunches over, half due to the intrusion and half due to the shame that must be written all over my face.

The combination of his crude words and his dominant touch have triggered a weird part of me. A sensation I've never experienced before. It's even worse than when my state of mind crashes down and dark thoughts swirl in my head.

These are darker but more erotic and damning in nature that it's impossible to control them.

"You said you wanted me to trust you," I croak, changing tactics. "This isn't the way to do it."

"You said you'll never trust me, so why should I keep on trying?"

"I...could consider it if you stop, but if you keep taking away my choice, I'll hate you."

"You already hate me, so that more or less has no meaning." A slight smirk curves his lips as he adds another finger and drives deep. "Besides, I did give you a choice. It's not my fault you picked the high road. You're already enjoying this, so let go."

My breath comes out in a shattered exhale as an ache builds between my legs.

And builds.

And builds.

My nerve endings resurrect to life all at once, and no matter how much I try to suppress that need for pleasure, I can't.

But I also can't allow him to take this from me. So I hold on to his forearm with all my might and shake my head. "What should I do to get you to stop?"

"I can feel your tight little cunt clenching around my fingers. Do you really want me to stop while you're on the edge?"

"None of your business. Just let me go." I'd rather die with sexual frustration than have an orgasm on his hand.

He lifts a shoulder and cuts me a glance. "I'll consider that if you tell me who the *guys* are in *you guys*?"

"My brother and cousin," I breathe out. "They're different from the rest of us."

"Hmm." His expression doesn't change, but his hand stops even though his fingers are still deep inside me.

The throbbing heightens and I wince, trying and failing to contain it. My thighs shake and I think I shift forward.

My eyes widen when I realize what I've done. I think... I just grinded into his hand.

I hope and wish and pray to every deity under the sun that he missed it.

But who am I kidding?

A wolfish smirk lifts his lips as he plunges in with renewed energy. His thumb circles my clit as he savagely thrusts so deep, I think he'll really tear me apart.

"You said you...would consider it."

"I did, and I decided against stopping. Besides, you're a slut for my fingers, baby."

I don't get to pretend or stop this. Even my hands no longer claw into his as the wave crashes into me.

The fact that we're speeding down a dark road doesn't even scare me. In fact, it adds to the thrill.

I slap a hand on my mouth to muffle the scream as I break into pieces around his fingers.

I thought about the fall before, a different fall, and I always imagined it to be dangerous.

A terrifying shadow.

This one, though? It's completely freeing. And I don't have the energy to hate myself for it.

Not now.

"You said you'd stop," I repeat in the silent darkness, holding on to the vain belief that I wouldn't have fallen the way I did.

"No, I didn't—you assumed that yourself. Not to mention, you were grinding your hips like a horny little whore, so quit the defiance for the sake of defiance." He removes his fingers from inside me.

Heat covers my ear and neck when he lifts his fingers in front of his face and stares at them glistening with my arousal.

"I have another question for you." He rubs the fingers that were inside me against his thumb, smearing the stickiness in a way that makes me want to crawl into a hole and die. "I felt something just now and I'm curious."

He slides the first finger into his mouth and make a show of licking it clean before proceeding with the other one. His eyes never leave mine through the whole process and I should be worried about us crashing into something, or falling to our deaths.

But I can't seem to think of that right now.

Either the orgasm hasn't really finished or I'm sick in the head, because my mouth goes dry and my thighs tremble.

After one last dart of his tongue around his fingers, he pops them out. "Tell me, Glyndon. Was I just touching your virgin cunt?"

KILLIAN

The expression on Glyndon's face can only be categorized as the start of a stroke.

If it were someone else, I'd be ninety-nine percent willing to shove the situation onto that shelf and move on to other pressing issues.

Such as the state of my cock that has, once again, crossed the impulse control red line. This change of events is more blasphemous than when her face was stuffed with my dick as she cried.

And the reason is nothing other than making her orgasm.

I don't get pleasure from giving. I don't even give. I fuck. Often—my release being the endgame. Or I used to before the whole event became a monotonous, pleasureless chore. My previous fuck buddies know that reciprocating isn't part of my modus operandi, but they still beg to suck my cock anyway.

As a certified non-giver, the only reason I thrust my fingers into Glyndon's cunt was for dominance—nothing more, nothing less. I wasn't planning on letting her finish and only wanted to drive her to the edge and leave her hanging so she'd beg for a release and still wouldn't get it.

But then something interesting happened.

I felt her hymen with my fingers.

I'm pretty sure I don't give a fuck about virgins. They're a hassle, a nuisance, and usually not a good fuck, so I have to get laid before and after to get my dose of physical stimuli.

So why the fuck is my vision filled with the image of the blood I'll smear all over Glyndon's thighs when I tear into her cunt?

"I... I don't know what you're talking about." Her face is red—like the blood that I will extort out of her—and so is her neck and her ears.

Even her lips have turned redder, hotter, and should I bleed those, too? See what exactly lurks behind that thunderous pulse, the soft beauty and the translucent skin? I bet red will make her a masterpiece.

Maybe now?

I focus back on the road.

Repress.

Repress.

I chant the words in my head for the millionth time tonight, because I swear to fuck this seemingly normal, innocent, fucking boring-on-paper girl might not be boring or normal, after all.

She's still innocent, though.

And I'll shatter that innocence, wreck it to pieces and flounder in its blood—just like all the other things in my life. She'll be my new masterpiece.

"We're talking about your intact hymen, baby. Aren't virgins at nineteen a Middle Ages currency? Actually, no, even then, they birthed babies at fourteen, so you're a rare species."

She shoots me a death glare—her standard expression when she's with me, aside from the annoyed and speechless ones.

The last is my favorite. Her lips will part and I'll start thinking about all the ways I can get my fingers between them.

"Are you done?"

"Glad you asked. I'm curious. Why have you remained a virgin until now?"

She stares out the window, huffing. "None of your business."

"What did I say about taking the high road? Do I need to deflower you on the road like an animal before or after you answer my question? Maybe while you scream and cry and bleed?"

Her head whips in my direction. Despite her attempts to camouflage her fear, the unnatural shine in her big eyes gives her away. Their green becomes lighter, frightened, chaotic. And so

does the shaking of her lower lip that's begging to be bitten. "Fuck you."

"Since you're somewhat of a prude, your cursing with that sweet voice is in fact a turn-on, so unless you're willing to suck my cock, I'd advise you to refrain from it."

"Oh wow, shocker. You actually used the word willing."

"It might not look like it, but I can be a good sport."

She snorts, and usually, that would be juvenile as fuck on other people. On her, however? I want to bite her lips into my mouth, feast on them with my tongue, and rip them against my teeth.

And that, ladies and gentleman, is the first time I've thought about kissing someone before I've even fucked them.

Kissing is pointless anyway, and I don't indulge in the activity in the first place. So why are my fingers twitching to wrap around her throat as I devour her lips?

"You're not a good sport, Killian. You're the worst game to ever exist. I bet you don't even know what the word *willing* means, or maybe you do and just don't care."

"Definitely the second option."

She stares at me with that cat-like curiosity. Glyndon thinks she's not interested in me, but she sometimes watches me as if she wants to peel back my skin and peer inside me, too.

It's the first time anyone has ever looked behind the façade and has been more in tune with what lurked deep within me. Maybe it's because she already knows I can't be contained.

Or that she's already seen my demons.

And while she's terrified of them, she's still curious about them.

"Do you do this a lot? Kidnapping girls to God knows where?"

"You agreed to the ride, so this is not kidnapping."

"Let me rephrase then. Do you stalk and haunt the hell out of girls and manipulate them to agree to a ride that is totally not kidnapping?"

A smile twitches on my lips. Her sarcasm is adorable. Still annoying, but adorable all the same. "You're the first, baby."

"How about what happened on that cliff?"

"The first for that, too."

"I don't know whether I should feel flattered or terrified."

"Go for the first. As I said, you can enjoy this instead of being scared of me."

She releases a long breath. "Why am I the first?"

"Others wouldn't be irritating and fight every step of the way. In fact, they'd beg for my attention."

"Well, I'm not *others*, so how about you grant them your attention and leave me alone?"

"They're not the ones I think about all the ways I'll stuff them with my cock, watch them writhe beneath me, then fill them up with my cum, you are."

Red creeps up her neck despite her attempts to remain unaffected. "Even if I don't want you?"

"Considering you shattered all over my fingers and had to mute your moans for it, I'd say you want me. You just hate it and will probably fight tooth and nail before you ever admit it out loud. Lucky for you, I understand your inner thoughts. Aren't you glad you have me and not some loser who'd run away after the first no?"

Her lips part and I smirk before I stare ahead. "Don't look so surprised. Told you, my superpower is mind reading."

She puffs out a breath. "You're just offering excuses."

"I'm not you, baby. I don't do that. Everything I say or do comes from assertiveness."

I slow the car to a halt and her attention snaps to our surroundings. To the forest that stretches for as far as the vision goes—dark, empty, and a perfect crime site.

Not that I'm contemplating crime.

Or am I?

"You still didn't answer my question."

She flinches even though my voice is the usual range. Okay, maybe it's lower. Which goes without saying, in view of the amount of blood that's been rushing to my cock since earlier.

Impulse control is my specialty, but even my godlike abilities are proving to be lacking whenever this girl is in sight.

She doesn't even smell special—an important sense that usually either makes me interested in fucking someone or crossing them off my list.

It's paint, I realize. She smells like oil paint and something fruity. Cherries. Or raspberries.

Too sweet, low-key, and definitely not something I'm usually into.

Glyndon as a whole is not something I'm usually into.

"Where is this place?" she whispers.

"Your posh friends haven't taken you on a ride to this part of the island? It's where we bury the bodies."

She chokes while swallowing, and I burst out laughing. *Christ.* I could get used to the feeling of seeping under her skin, watching her flounder with her cheeks reddening and her eyes widening. Or witnessing the light in her irises change from high to low and everything in between.

I've been studying emotions since I realized I was different—back at that mice incident—and this is the first time I've met someone whose emotions are so transparent, so visible, it's fucking fascinating.

Curious, even.

I'm tempted to explore it more, delve deeper, hook against her darkest parts and expose it all.

Everything.

I want to see inside her.

Literally and figuratively.

"I was kidding," I say after my laughter subsides.

"You're not funny."

"And you didn't answer my question. If I have to ask again, it won't be with words, Glyndon."

She gives me a look, dirty and a bit condescending. "Do you get off on threatening people?"

"No, and I wouldn't have had to if you weren't being difficult over a trivial matter."

"So my privacy is trivial now?"

"There's no such thing as privacy in this day and age. Any form of privacy is a smokescreen that's coded by numbers and algorithms. Besides, the topic of your virginity isn't private anymore since I now know about it."

"You're unbelievable."

"And you're stalling."

She releases a long breath, whether in frustration or resignation, I'm not sure. But she remains silent for a while as the sound of the engine fills the car.

"I just didn't feel like having sex. Happy now?"

"My happiness has nothing to do with this. Why didn't you feel like having sex?"

"That's another question."

"Never said there was a limit to the number of questions I'd ask."

"And let me guess, I have to answer or you'll threaten me with something worse, and if I keep fighting, the threat will escalate until you take it too far."

I can't help the smile that pulls my lips. "I knew you were a fast learner."

She stares at me for a beat, two, three and doesn't break eye contact.

Ah. I see.

That's what attracted me to her the first time. The way she held my gaze when many find it impossible to stare at me for long—my brother and mother included.

Whether they're uncomfortable or intimidated by me, I don't know.

Jeremy once said I have a look that makes people uncomfortable in their own skin, so it's a given that they'd choose to stay away.

Not Glyndon.

Not once has she looked away from my eyes. As if she needs to see me at all times.

I don't even need to see me at all times.

My being is a condensation of atoms and molecules, a homogenous, perfect combination of my parents' genes that formed a human being who's unable to relate to humanity.

So the fact that she's interested in seeing this entity—even out of fear—is another rare occurrence.

The accumulation of all these arbitrary, divergent traits in one person should be frowned upon.

With another sigh, definitely resigned this time, she lets her quiet voice fill the car, "I haven't found anyone I want to have sex

with."

"Why not? Surely you've had some attention."

"I just haven't felt like it. Do you have any other questions, Your Majesty?"

"Not for now, no. I'll let you know when I do."

She narrows her eyes. "Really? You won't say anything about the topic?"

"Like how I'll eventually fuck you? I'm happy to talk about it, but I don't think you're ready for that conversation."

"I'll never let you."

"Never say never, baby."

"I liked it better when you were demanding answers."

I reach for her thigh. "Want me to ask more questions when I'm on top of you this time?"

"No! I'm just saying." She absentmindedly tucks a strand behind her ear. A blonde one, because of fucking course, this bundle of weird composition has blonde strands in her honey-colored hair.

She peeks at me from beneath her lashes. "Can we go back? I have class early tomorrow."

"Not yet. You haven't seen what we're here for."

Her pupils dilate the slightest bit, but she remains composed.

Hmm.

It must be her upbringing. Someone taught her not to back down, even when scared. To keep her spine straight and her gaze ahead.

To be the definition of her last name.

"I thought we were going for a ride. Isn't that already done?"

"A ride needs a purpose." I step out of the car.

She doesn't.

So I go to her side and fling the door open.

Glyndon—innocent, sweet, and lush like her perfume—thinks she can get away by trying to glue herself to the seat.

"Come on, baby."

She shakes her head. "What if you're luring me to my grave? Maybe you weren't kidding and this is exactly where you bury the bodies. Or worse, maybe a few of your underlings are waiting in the woods to gang rape me."

"If I wanted to bury you, I would've killed you about an hour ago before I got beaten up for your currently absent trust. And there won't be anyone touching you before I cover my cock with your blood."

She purses her lips. "Is that supposed to be reassuring?"

"Not reassuring, no. Mere statement of facts."

"You're so cutthroat, it's disgusting."

"And you're so repetitive, it's starting to piss me off." I tilt my head. "Come out."

When she hesitates, I fling her seatbelt off and grab her wrist. She tries to fight, her body going stiff, probably letting panic take control.

I drag her behind the car with ease. She's small, I could crush her with one single hand—without full force.

Her skin appears pale blue in the darkness, like fresh corpses. If she somehow starts bleeding and the red is added to the mix, her skin will look ethereal under the moon.

The fact that I'm choosing not to act on those fantasies with this girl is a marvelous manifestation of my impulse control.

Repress, motherfucker.

"I can walk on my own." Her voice shakes as she tries to release herself and fails miserably. Countless times.

She's infuriating enough to keep on trying. I'll give her that.

"You didn't when I gave you the chance earlier, so the ball is in my court now."

"Stop it, Killian."

I pause at the sound of my name in her tiny little voice that's no different from a lullaby. I don't even like people's voices most of the time. Some are high-pitched, others are low, and most are fucking annoying.

Hers, however, is the right amount of sweet and melodic. The right amount of softness and paralyzing terror.

I glance at her. "Stop what?"

"Whatever you're doing."

"Even when you'll like what I'm doing?"

"I doubt I'll like anything you do."

"Sure about that?" We come to a halt near a small lake and Glyndon goes still.

Her attempts to struggle are long forgotten as she stares at the scene in front of us.

Hundreds of tiny yellow dots light up the trees and shine on the water's surface with the efficiency of small lamps.

As she watches the fireflies, I watch her.

I'm captured in a chokehold by the way her shoulders relax and her lips fall open. And the way her eyes reflect the yellow lights like a mirror.

They're shining, brighter, faster, and I don't think about it as I pull out my phone and take a picture.

Commemorating the moment feels like a need instead of a mere action. It's not impulse either; it's much fucking worse.

She doesn't even focus on the flash, still engrossed in the fireflies. "They're so beautiful. I can't believe I didn't know about this place."

"It's our college's property."

"Did you bring a lot of your victims here?"

"So that's what you are now, my victim? I like that. And no, this is where I come to when I want to be alone, so you're the first."

"I'm a lot of firsts."

"I'm surprised by that, too. Do you like it?"

"I love it."

"Told you that you would. I figured an artist would appreciate the dark beauty of nature."

She finally focuses on me. "How do you even know I'm an artist?"

"I know a lot of things about you, Glyndon."

"Why? Just what do you want?"

"I want a lot of things. What context are we talking about now?"

"This, bringing me here. You must have some purpose."

"Told you, so you can trust me. I thought this place would appeal to you."

Her eyes turn into slits. "That's it? You're not going to do anything funny?"

"Define funny."

"The fact that you're even asking means you will."

"I'm just considering my options." I sit on the edge of the dock, letting my feet dangle, then retrieve a cigarette and light it.

Glyndon approaches me but stops and waves away the smoke. "Why am I not surprised you're addicted to poison?"

"I'm not addicted to anything."

"The cigarette hanging from your lips testifies otherwise."

I pull it from my lips and hold it in the light of fireflies. "It's a habit I use to keep my hands busy."

"Does that mean you'll quit if you want to?"

"I'll quit if you take their place and keep my lips and hands busy."

"No, thanks."

I lift a shoulder and tap the spot beside me. "They look better from this angle."

"What look better?" she asks in a spooked tone, and why the fuck am I getting harder?

"Fireflies or bodies, whatever floats first."

"Your dark sense of humor is really on another level." She slowly approaches, then before settling down, she hesitates.

That habit of questioning everything I offer will be gone soon.

"Don't worry. I won't fuck you tonight."

"Wow. Thanks." She flops down beside me, her fruity perfume getting stronger. Or my sense of smell is picking her up faster.

"You're welcome."

"That wasn't an actual thank-you."

"Then why did you say it?"

"Sarcasm. Ever heard of it?"

"I know. I'm just messing with you." I tuck that blonde strand behind her ear and it turns red, along with her neck.

"Do you like messing with people a lot?"

"Not all people, no. Just a select few."

"So I'm a VIP now?"

"If you want."

"Seriously, talking to you is like speaking to an evil robot."

"Evil robot, huh?"

"Yeah, you know, the ones who get destroyed at the end of sci-fi films."

"You mean the ones whose red eyes flash in the last second of the movie, signaling their return?"

"You shouldn't be proud of being evil."

"That's the thing, baby. I don't see myself as evil."

"Please don't tell me you see yourself as a hero." She sounds even more spooked than earlier.

"No, I don't. I just see myself as neutral. Instead of black, white, or gray. I'm colorless."

"You're an entity. You can't be colorless." She huffs. "You're just black."

"Black?"

"Yeah, I give people colors and you're definitely black, like your soul, heart, and that disturbing head of yours."

I stare at her for a beat and then smile. *Jesus.*

This girl is getting herself into big fucking trouble.

Because I want to keep talking to her.

And I don't even like talking to people.

I want to own her, even though I have no fucking clue what owning people is all about.

It can't be different from having pets then wanting to see inside them, right?

KILLIAN

“What the fuck is this? Shitting on my parade day?”
I don’t pause at Nikolai’s voice on my way inside the mansion. Instead, I reach the fridge and grab a bottle of water.

He throws the nearest object he can find at me, a Zippo, and I tilt my head to the side, letting it collide with the bottle of vodka. It shatters against the counter in a ceremony of glass and liquor.

“I’m assuming you’ll clean it up and replace my vodka,” Jeremy says from the bottom of the stairs, arms crossed.

“It’s my vodka. Fuck off.” My cousin shoves an ice pack on his swollen jaw and props his foot on the edge of the sofa.

Leaning against the counter, I cross my legs at the ankle. “Bad mood?”

“And you’re not? That loser won against you.”

I lift a shoulder. “I won something better than a meaningless match.”

Like Glyndon’s company and even a temporary truce from fighting me once she was watching those fireflies—and I wasn’t touching her.

She eventually relaxed once I forced my hand to remain still. Something that proved to be harder in practice than theory. Turning this into a habit is out of the question. After all, I only need her to get her guard down a little, let me in a little so I can figure her all out and, in retrospect, delve into the reasons behind my interest in her.

Am I ready to go the extra mile for that? Sure as fuck.

Considering the crease in her brows when I drove her back to her dorm, I'd say I still have a ways to go.

She's a stubborn, hotheaded little shit, and I'm here for every fucking second of it.

Glyndon might be the solid, huge rock, but I'm water and water might slam into the rock at first, but it'll eventually break through it.

"What's better than winning, motherfucker?" Nikolai grunts. "Next time, don't take my fight if you're going to lose it. My image is at stake here, Satan's heir."

I pull out my pack of cigarettes and stare at it for a beat, remembering Glyndon's words from earlier about poison. Then I shake my head and stuff one between my lips. "I assume you won the one after?"

"Barely," Jeremy answers on his behalf, then heads to the minibar and pours himself a drink. "An art student nearly beat him to death first."

"Bullshit!" Nikolai jumps up and points his ice pack at Jeremy. "I was only taking it easy on him at the beginning. And that bitch is no ordinary art student. He obviously works out."

I raise a brow and blow out a trail of smoke. "Superhuman art student?"

"Maybe one of those comic book superheroes, huh?" Jeremy prompts. "Posh rich boy by day and vigilante by night."

"With a mask, a cape, and a bat car."

"Maybe a suit, too?"

"Fuck you both simultaneously." Nikolai flops back against the sofa. "For your information, Landon was the reigning king in all the championships he participated in *AND* he's the current leader of the Elites."

Jeremy props an elbow on the counter beside me and takes a sip of his drink. "Our Niko actually knows information like that? Since when?"

"Since Gareth was whispering in my ear. And what the fuck? I know all the information."

"That implies you'll use violence."

"Of fucking course. Why would I need to fill my head with other boring information?"

I tap the cigarette in the bottle of water, letting the ashes tarnish the pure liquid. "Landon?"

"Landon King," Nikolai offers. "Creighton's cousin, or second cousin, or what-the-fuck ever. I say if his bitch clone brother hadn't shown up out of thin air, he would've kept the fight going all night long. That crazy motherfucker smiles when he's beaten up, like you, Satan's heir." He kicks the table, and it tumbles down, all the glass shattering to minuscule pieces. "Let's fight, Killer. I still have energy to purge."

"Pass." Not only will he go for hours on end, but I'm also in a good mood and don't want to fight.

It's not my preferred purging method, anyway.

"Control your temper." Jeremy sits beside him and offers him his drink. "It's going to get you killed one day."

"One day isn't today." He swallows the contents of the glass in one go. "And it's not temper, it's energy, Jer. Goes all the way to my dick. I should've gotten laid tonight."

"So Landon and his twin brother ruined your night?" I circle back to the topic at hand.

"Fuck those rich little boys, especially the dainty one who looked no different from a lotus flower. He shared Landon's looks but had the aura of a weakling."

"Not to mention, he stole your fun," Jeremy points out and Nikolai tsks.

"Stole your fun, how?"

"Well, cousin, as soon as that dainty lotus flower showed up, Landon hiked up the aggression and went all in. But when he left, Landon actually lost. Just like that. Talk about weird twin shit."

He was probably scaring his brother.

Well, fuck.

Maybe Glyndon is right and her brother is on the spectrum. I know Eli King is for sure. We met as kids through our parents, and he was the only one who had a look that mirrored mine.

Irrevocably bored.

Now the question is whether to eliminate Landon or not. Let's wait and see if he forms an obstacle in my endeavors with Glyndon first.

"I swear to fuck I'm done with twin fuckery after dealing with Mia and Maya's swapping shit. Speaking of my sisters, let me make sure they're in their dorms and not sneaking somewhere and causing someone to lose their lives." Nikolai fishes out his phone and taps a message—probably to his bodyguards. Being part of the Bratva gives both Jeremy and Nikolai special security that even the campus can't interfere with.

"Make sure to tighten security." Jeremy's brow furrows. "I caught Anoushka sneaking around in the fight club with her *new* friends."

"Shouldn't have let her go to the enemy's territory," Nikolai says absentmindedly. "Now, she'll start developing habits of fraternizing with those posh kids."

"Over my dead body." Jeremy takes a long drink. "I don't like her friends. Especially that loud silver-haired one."

"Cecily Knight," I supply for him. "Her father owns an investment corporation and her mother is some higher-up in social services."

"And you know all of this because?" Jeremy asks.

"I do my research about our neighbors. Besides, I told you Aiden and Elsa King, Creighton and Eli's parents, are friends with my folks. And so are Cole and Silver Nash, Ava's parents."

Nikolai pulls the ice pack away from his face, revealing a purple bruise near his temple. "How about fake lotus and Landon's parents?"

"Never met them. Heard of them, though. Their father has half of the King fortune. The other half belongs to Aiden. Their mother is a renowned artist." I type her name in the search bar of my phone and show them the sketch paintings of people, places, and memories.

Nikolai whistles. "Don't understand shit about art, but these would look sick as tattoos." He snatches the phone to stare at a family picture taken at some opening of a gallery.

Levi holds Astrid by the waist as she smiles at the camera, seeming happy, fulfilled, like Mom does whenever Gareth and I show up to her charities.

Landon stands beside his mother, holding her shoulder. Brandon is by his father's side, grabbing Glyndon's shoulder.

Among all of them, Landon's smile is the fakest. No one would discern it, not even his parents, but he's putting on the most epic show so that even he probably believes he's happy to be there.

Been there, done that, have the pictures to prove it.

Glyn's smile however is the saddest. She doesn't want to smile, looking a bit uncomfortable in her formal little dark blue dress that matches her mother's pantsuit.

She's putting on a show but in a completely different way than her brother. They're both pretending to be happy, but she's the only one who's feeling bad about it.

"Met them only once and I can tell this is the fake lotus." Nikolai taps Brandon's face. "On closer inspection, he's hot. Not sure if I'd fuck him or his sister. Maybe both at the same time if they're not weirded out about seeing each other naked."

I pull my phone from his hand and stalk to the stairs without a word. Then fetch my Zippo and throw it in a flash. It hits Nikolai on the side of his head—the injured side.

Good. I see my quarterback skills aren't completely gone.

Nikolai slams a hand on his temple and howls, "What the fuck was that for, you motherfucking fuck?"

Jeremy tips his head against the sofa and laughs, the sound following after me as I reach the top of the stairs.

My steps are nonchalant, normal, but my body's temperature is not. Maybe I should beat Nikolai to the point that Aunt Rai won't recognize him next time she sees him.

Gareth's door opens and he steps out holding the phone to his face, a smile on his lips. "There he is."

He comes to stand beside me, placing the phone in our direct view. Mom and Dad are on the other end, looking to be in the garden.

It's around dusk there, and the sun makes its descent behind them, giving them a picturesque background.

Reina Ellis is a beautiful blonde—the type you find on the cover of magazines and wonder how the hell does she look to be in her thirties when she's in her late forties. She has a natural shine in her blue eyes, one that neither Gareth nor I inherited.

My father, however, has a harder look, and it probably has to do with his line of work and the big-fish-eats-little-fish mentality.

Let's say time has treated Asher Carson well, too. He has sharp features that both my brother and I got in our genes, and he passed out his green eyes to Gareth. In a way, my brother is a copy of him, both in looks and personality.

I'm the bleaker version of both of them.

The black sheep of the family.

An automatic smile pulls on my lips. "Hi, Mom. Looking great, as usual."

"Don't give me that, you ungrateful son. You haven't called me in two days."

"I've been busy with studies. You know how brutal med school is. Besides"—I hold my brother by the shoulder—"I'm sure Gareth tells you all about me."

His smile remains in place and he doesn't even stiffen. We have an unspoken rule that we're the perfect siblings in front of our parents.

I break that rule if I feel like it, but Gareth never does.

He cares.

"I'm sure you're busy, but check in occasionally." She sighs. "I miss your faces all the time. Will you come visit, Kill? I haven't seen you since the summer."

"I'll see how things go with school."

"Make time and visit over the next holiday," Dad tells me—no, he informs me.

I counter the hostile energy with an even bigger smile. "Hi, Dad. Do you miss me, too?"

I expect him to fall for the provocation, but he smiles while stroking Mom's shoulder. "Of course, I miss you, son. Your mom and I would love to have you over with your brother next time."

"I'll make sure he comes along," Gareth says like the golden fucking boy he is.

"Wait a second." Mom gets close to the camera, staring at me. "Oh my God! Is that a cut on your lip? Killian Patrick Carson, did you get into a fight?"

Mom's habit of using my middle name when she's upset is a translation of her giver-of-life-and-name status.

I can't help being amused by it every time.

Gareth goes rigid, completely blindsided, but by the time he opens his mouth, I'm already grinning. "Unless making out is a fight, I don't think so?"

Her lips fall open. "Didn't need that image."

"You're the one who asked, Mom. Besides, I'm at my prime. You didn't think I'd just be studying, right?"

"Tone it down," Dad warns. He has a sixth sense of figuring out when it'll become too much for my mom and cuts it off. Over time, I've started to develop that sense, too.

Only, I use it to push people to their limits. Not my mom.

Others.

That's the only thing Dad and I agree on.

"Well, I guess that's fine as long as you're not getting into trouble." Her voice softens. "Take care of each other, boys, okay? I love you."

"Love you, too, Mom," Gareth says.

"Love you, Mom," I speak with the same level of sincerity as my brother.

She hangs up with a huge smile on her face.

As soon as they're gone, Gareth pushes away from me as if I were the plague.

"Go easy on the disgust level, big bro. It makes you look weak."

He flips me off and stalks back to his room.

I head to mine and check my phone. Countless unread texts and booty calls sit in my notifications. A few from annoying clingy pests who don't know how to simply pick up their dignity and back off.

My feet come to a halt in the middle of the room as I scroll to the photos from tonight.

Plural.

The first was from afar when I first saw Glyndon with Annika and her friends. I watched her for exactly fifteen minutes before I told Jeremy about his sister's presence and got my opening to approach her.

In the pictures I've taken, Glyndon is either listening or laughing about something they said. She's not the talker in that group—or in her family—and it shows.

The other pictures were with the fireflies. I zoom in on her face, then trail my finger down to where her hand is clenched on her shorts.

I can almost smell raspberries and paint as I trace the contours of her cheeks, neck, lips.

My thumb taps on her face and I can finally see what Devlin loved about her, what he struggled with for her.

How he floundered and cried and begged on his fucking knees for her.

Still, he didn't fuck her.

She didn't want to, is what she said.

Motherfucker got friend-zoned to death. Literally.

I'd feel sorry for him if I knew how. But since I don't, I'm completely fine with finishing what he couldn't.

GLYNDON

"Where the hell have you been?"

I fidget at the entrance to the en-suite flat that I share with Cecily, Ava—and more recently, Annika.

She was supposed to stay in a secured solitary dorm that her family arranged for her, but since the three of us like her and we have a spare room, we invited her to stay with us. Apparently, her brother was against it, but she once again got approval directly from her father—with her mother's help.

The other day, we talked to her mother over a video call and she was the sweetest, most stunning woman I've ever seen. Okay, maybe top five with Mum, Aunt Elsa, and my grandma.

Anyway, Annika's mother didn't look the part of being married into the mafia at all. But then again, Anni doesn't look the part of a mafia princess either, so maybe it's hereditary.

Our flat is cozy, with a spacious living area, four bedrooms, and a kitchen with black countertops.

The source of the question that was asked as soon as I walked in was Ava. She's dressed in fluffy pajamas and a robe with black and pink feathers. Her hair is pulled up in a messy bun, and a white mask covers her face.

Cecily peeks out from her room, black-framed glasses covering half her face, and she's wearing a hoodie that says *When I'm dead, bury me facedown so the world can kiss my ass*. "You're finally back. We were worried sick about you."

I let my hand fall to my side and I rub my palm on my shorts. How am I supposed to tell them where I've been?

Well, guys, I've been kind of kidnapped by what I'm sure is a serial killer in the making, but I forgot about that as we sat and watched fireflies.

Oh, and he made me orgasm while speeding, in his damn car, and I liked it.

That sounds fucked up even in my head.

"I went for a ride to clear my mind," I tell the girls, hoping they'll buy it.

Ava narrows her eyes behind the mask and weighs me up and down. "Then why do you look all flushed and shit?"

"I took the stairs. You know, exercise."

"Right."

"Where's Anni?" I attempt. "Is she okay?"

"She said she's practicing, and you're not changing the subject, Glyn," Ava hikes a hand on her hip. "I'm waiting for a proper answer instead of some excuses."

I chew on my bottom lip, then release it. Jeez. Even Cecily is watching me like a stern teacher which doesn't mesh up with the pink bandana—definitely a gift from Ava—that holds her silver hair.

"I was really on a ride." No lie there, so I definitely sound convincing.

"Really?" Ava circles me with the expression of a mama bear.

I nod, a bit too quickly.

"How could you leave right when Lan's fight started? We almost crushed those King's U wankers, but Nikolai won at the last second." She sounds dejected like some fanatic fan.

I don't say anything, because I simply couldn't care less whether Lan lost or won. If I'd been there, I wouldn't have stuck around for the fight anyway.

Seeing my brother in action is too nauseating for me to handle. I'm a coward like that.

"Even Bran came," Ava continues. "Let me tell you, the crowd went wild. This year's championship will draw a fortune in bets. I'm totally trying my hand at this one."

"Wait. Go back." My throat dries. "Bran came to the fighting ring?"

"Yeah."

"While Lan was fighting?"

"Yup. He left during, though."

My heart lunges at the thought of Bran witnessing all that violence—from Lan, no less.

I might not like violence, but Bran is downright squeamish about it.

Tapping my back pocket, I fish out my phone and start to text him when the doorbell rings.

"I'll get that," Cecily heads to open it.

"Not yet." Ava runs back to her room, probably to remove her mask. She refuses to look anything less than perfect in front of outsiders.

Glyndon: Are you okay?

Bran: You can ask me that in person, little princess.

I turn around at the sound of a commotion, and sure enough, Remi is pushing in a poker-faced Creigh, who's holding a case of beer while he carries a food container.

Brandon follows behind them with a sketchpad in hand.

"Ladies, your favorite lord has bestowed you with his god-level presence. No need to push, I have enough attention to divide equally between you all. Never mind these two, they begged to come along."

"You made us come," Creigh says point-blank.

"Now, hush, Cray Cray. Just because you beat up that lowlife doesn't mean you're up with me on the god level."

Cecily crosses her arms and taps her foot on the floor. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Remi stares down at himself. "I'm looking as great as deities during their sacrificing days and just as dashing. I don't think I forgot anything?"

"The fact that we have classes tomorrow, genius. Some of us actually take uni seriously."

"Don't be a bore, Ces. I swear to fucking fuck, you're going to die in the middle of one your books one day. Don't come asking for a spot in my joy corner in the afterlife." He pushes past her, dumps the food container on the coffee table, and throws his weight on the sofa, making himself at home.

Creigh nods in our direction, a red bruise covering his jaw. I swallow at the reminder of who put it there and can't help pointing at it. "Are you okay?"

My cousin doesn't even touch it. "I've survived worse."

"Do you have to keep fighting, Creigh? Aunt Elsa would be so worried."

"She won't be worried about something she doesn't know." His words are spoken casually, but I can hear the warning behind them. "Also, why was he looking at you?"

"W-who?"

"The younger Carson. He was looking at you during the fight."

"You must have been imagining it."

He gives me a knowing look but thankfully doesn't push it.

"Come here, spawn. Use your brute strength to move this shit up," Remi calls from the other side of the room, kicking a heavy antique chair.

"Stop changing our decor, Remi!" Cecily runs in an attempt to stop him, but Creigh is already beside him.

"Not my fault your decor is as boring as your books, nerd."

"Screw you, manwhore."

"Not interested. It'd be boring, too."

"Ugh, I'll strangle you one day."

"Not into that either. Jesus, you're scary, woman. No wonder they say the quiet ones are the kinkiest." He physically grabs Creighton and uses him as a shield. "Protect my lordship from her venomous claws, spawn. This cougar will kill me in my prime."

Creigh doesn't move, but he tilts his head back. "And that's a bad idea because..."

"What the fuck? What the actual fucking fuck? You'd sell me out for Cecily? Jesus, my lordship is having an existential crisis. Listen up, spawn. If you don't have me, no one will be able to translate your weird shit."

"Oh," Creigh says.

"That's right. You need my lordship's presence."

"He has a point," Creigh tells Cecily and starts to move the chair.

"What's with all the noise?" Ava emerges from her room, sans mask and with her hair loose.

She immediately figures out the situation and goes to Cecily's rescue. But Creigh is already moving the chair and Remi's laughing like a dark overlord.

I let the commotion slip to the background and step toward Bran, then touch his arm. "Are you okay?"

He's smiling at the whole scene, and I love seeing Bran smile, probably because he finds it hard to. At least, not genuinely.

So I'm ready to put up with all the noise if it's to see him happy.

"I am now," he tells me.

"I heard about the fight club. Why did you even go there, Bran? You don't like those scenes."

"I didn't have a choice." He retrieves his phone, scrolls through it, then shows me the last bit of the conversation he had with Lan.

He has him saved as 'Spare Parts.' It started when they were in their teens. Back then, Bran had Lan saved as 'Other Half,' but Landon made fun of him and said he was saving him as 'Spare Parts,' so out of pure spite, Bran saved him as 'Spare Parts,' too.

Something that Mum chose to think of as a joke while Dad was super pissed.

In the conversation, Lan sent Bran a picture of me in the crowd. It's zoomed in to show me clenching my hands and my expression alarmed.

That was in the middle of Creigh and Killian's match.

Spare Parts: Our little princess is in trouble. Care for some saving?

I briefly close my eyes, then sigh. "I'm sorry, Bran."

"Don't be. It's not your fault. Besides, I did watch him get knocked down by the other fighter, so it's not a complete disaster." He watches me closely. "Are you really okay, though? It looks bad in the picture."

I clear my throat and tuck a blonde strand behind my ear. "You know how I get in violent situations."

"So don't go there anymore, Glyn. I can't protect you from Lan in his environment."

"I don't need protection from Lan. I'm not scared of him," I say it and mean it this time.

Dealing with Killian has taught me that there are always monsters worse than the ones you know.

Even monsters have levels of depravity, and Killian's is on the highest pedestal.

Bran gives me a look. "Just be careful."

"Don't worry, I will."

Seeming to be satisfied with my answer, he pulls me to his side as we join the others. We sit beside Remi, who has already moved all our sofas and even decor lamps to create a circle that resembles Satan's summoning ritual.

Creigh's munching on some snacks while sitting on the floor, his legs crossed.

Ava and Cecily, who lost terribly, are sitting side by side, crossing their arms and glaring.

The only one who's laughing is Remi while mixing drinks and throwing a snack in Creigh's direction. Then he reaches into the container he brought and grins. "Guess what I have here, bitches?"

"If it's not your severed penis, we're not interested," Cecily says.

"Not interested," Ava echoes. "And holy shit, did our resident prude just say penis? Please tell me someone recorded that."

"Shut up. You're ruining the comeback line," Cecily nudges her.

Ava snorts a laugh, then stops. "Fine, fine, we're totally not interested, Rems."

"Are you sure?" His face is pure mischief mixed with gloating as he slowly opens the container to reveal several smaller containers. "Because I've got fish and chips!"

Silence fills the room before Creigh jumps up and snatches a container—no, two.

"You get one for being the sweetest ever, Glyn." Remi gives me a container and then another to Bran. "And you for being a bloody good sport, mate."

Then he smirks at Cecily and Ava, who are watching the containers with parted lips that are only short of drooling. "You two, however, will need to beg my lordship."

Creigh already opened his container, and the smell wafts through the air. Ava swallows. "It's our house. The least you can

do is pay up for interrupting our night."

"I'll pay up in money, but not fish and chips. Now, say, *please, your lordship*."

"Go wank a horse, your lordship." Ava glares.

He makes an error sound like this is a game show. "You have two more tries."

"Just give me that." Cecily snatches a container and Ava jumps on his back to stop him from fighting.

"Cray Cray, save me from these crazy cougars!"

My cousin, however, has zero interest in his environment when he's eating. His whole attention is on devouring the chips.

Bran and I laugh as we begin to eat, too. Or I do. Bran puts his down and starts sketching.

Some would assume he'd sketch them, but since he doesn't do humans, he translates the scene into a chaos of lines and shades of gray.

"That's insanely beautiful. Please tell me you have social media I can follow."

Both Bran and I glance back to find Annika staring down on his sketch. The smile on her face is so big that it's contagious.

She's wearing a purple leotard over tights, probably having come out in the middle of practicing.

"Hi, I'm Annika. You must be Glyn's brother. She talks about you all the time. Actually, no, she's not the talkative type. Ava does, though."

"I'm Brandon."

"Nice to meet you." She retrieves her phone. "What's your IG? TikTok? Snap? WeChat? WhatsApp?"

"I only have IG."

"Oh. That's fine," she chatters happily and fawns over the work he's posted online.

Something that makes Bran happy—so happy that I can feel the joyful energy radiating off him. He's definitely not bothered by Annika's hyper energy.

"Why, hello there." Remi shoos both Ava and Cecily and slides to Anni's side. "Am I dreaming or have I stumbled upon an angel with an American accent?"

All of us, except for Creigh, cringe.

Anni chuckles. "You're so sweet!"

"I prefer hot, but we can go with sweet for now. I'm Remington. Son of a lord and grandson of an earl and currently holding a lordship title. One hundred and ninety-five in the line to the throne of the commonwealth and have the perfect looks and wealth to go with it."

"Wow, that's impressive. I'm Annika. No royalty, though."

"She's mafia royalty," Cecily waltzes to her side, holding a container, and Ava occupies her other side. "Stay away from her."

"You're so beautiful and pure, and I have to warn you away from this den of vipers, Anni."

The three of them start arguing again, and Annika finds her way to Creighton's side. "Hi there."

He doesn't reply since he's eating. Creigh takes that seriously.

Super seriously.

"I'm Annika. You are?"

No response. It's like she's not standing in front of him. So she waves her hand, and when he doesn't show a sign of recognition, I expect her to give up. That's what most people do.

However, Annika grins and sits beside him. "This dish must be so delicious if you're this engrossed in it. Can I have a bite?"

"Get your own," he mumbles after swallowing.

"I can't really eat the whole plate. It looks fried, so a bite would do."

"No," he says point-blank.

"Just a little—" One second, she's reaching for his container, and the next, he's pinning her against the back of the sofa by her collarbone with one arm as he continues eating with the other.

"I said, no."

"Okay." Her smile falters. "Can you let me go?"

"I don't trust you not to come after my food again, so you have to either stay in this position or leave."

"Got it."

She actually remains still, watching him the whole time.

"Cray Cray!" Remi shrieks and pulls Anni from beneath his hold. "What are you doing being rude to our American angel on the first meeting? Didn't I teach you manners?"

"It's okay." Anni laughs. "I think he doesn't like people coming after his food."

"Yeah, he's weird like that." Remi pushes a container her way. "You can have this one."

"What's it called?"

We all stare at her dumbfounded and even Creighton *pffts* between bites.

She stares at him. "What? Did I say something wrong?"

"She's American, guys," Ava tells us.

"Yeah," I echo.

"Yeah, American," Cecily says as if it's an insult.

"I'm actually half Russian." Annika stares between us with an awkward smile.

"It's fish and chips, love," Remi starts. "It's like the national English dish, the revolution of the modern era and the bringer of joy. Even my lordship likes this simple working-class dish more than shagging. Okay, maybe they're on the same level. Look, even picky Glyn is eating."

"I'm not picky." I glare while munching on a chip. "Don't make me take Ava and Cecily's side and kick you out."

"Trying is free. Succeeding isn't, peasant."

I'm ready to go at his throat, but my phone vibrates. "You just hold on, Remi."

I let a chip hang between my lips and fish out my phone.

The text that sits on my screen makes me pause.

Unknown Number: What are you doing?

My first thought is that this could be the unknown number behind all those ambiguous texts, but that one doesn't usually ask how I'm doing—just drops something nasty and leaves.

My thoughts are reconfirmed when another text comes through.

Unknown Number: Don't tell me you're sleeping? Though, of course you would be after having that orgasm. I'm the one who's left with a cock so hard, I keep fantasizing about how you'll bounce on it.

I choke on the half-eaten chip, and Bran taps my back and passes me a can of pop. "You okay?"

My cheeks must be crimson. The thought of Bran or anyone else seeing that text makes my skin crawl. "Totally cool. I'll be back."

I practically bolt to my room, dash inside, and slam the door shut, then lean against it. I jump when my phone vibrates in my hand again.

Unknown Number: Leaving me on read is bad etiquette, baby. I know you're there.

Glyndon: How the hell do you have my number?

Unknown Number: It's a lot easier than you think. But that's not the issue here. My unsatisfied cock is. I really am not the giving type.

Glyndon: No one asked you to give anything.

Unknown number: Your little cunt would argue otherwise. I can still feel it clenching against my fingers with the desperation of a nymph. Also, I still have your taste on them. Haven't washed my hands yet. I think I'll use them to rub one out in your honor while I imagine your body writhing beneath me as your blood coats my dick.

My core clenches as tingles spread all over my skin. I slowly close my eyes, willing it to go away, but it doesn't.

Not even close.

I sit on the edge of the bed, my fingers slightly trembling.

Logically, I know this is just his sick fixation with my virginity. That he really won't stop until he has it.

His twisted interest in me might have been poked on top of that cliff, but it was fully activated once he found out I was a virgin. Even his eyes shone in a way that was way different than before. His body tightened, and I could see the devil in him. Unmasked.

Unhinged.

Uncontrollable.

He's a special breed who has absolutely no brakes. And the fact that I'm the subject of his sick fetish is terrorizing.

Considering that he probably has no limits, it's absolutely horrifying to imagine what lengths he'd go to in order to get what he wants.

And yet, I can't stop myself from being affected by his words.

Just...what is wrong with me?

Am I perhaps as defective as he is?

My heart hammers as another text lights up the screen.

Unknown Number: The real thing is better than my imagination, though. What are the chances of you opening your legs if I come over right now?

Glyndon: Zero.

Unknown Number: And if I ask nicely?

Glyndon: Still zero.

Unknown Number: You should've said 50%. Because there's a 100% option if I somehow slip into your room while you're sleeping.

Glyndon: My friends won't let you.

Unknown Number: They won't find out, and if they do, I'll strap them to their beds with duct tape.

Glyndon: Even Annika?

Unknown Number: Especially that one. She's loud as fuck most of the time.

Glyndon: Jeremy will kill you.

Unknown Number: Not if I tell him she was putting herself in danger and I tied her up for her own good. And aww, are you worried about me, baby?

Glyndon: If by worried, you mean I'm commissioning a voodoo doll with your name on it to stab it to death, decapitate it, and watch the tendons snap, then sure, I'm sick with worry.

Unknown Number: I like your gory imagination and attention to detail. You should show me your paintings sometime. I want to see inside your head.

Glyndon: Never.

Unknown Number: Never say never.

Glyndon: I'm going to sleep.

Unknown Number: Sleep tight and dream of me. And who knows? Maybe it'll come true.

GLYNDON

Something moves between my legs and I mumble a whine. It thickens and I startle awake. At first, I'm disoriented, my mind foggy with sleep and my response slower than a vintage train.

But I don't get to react.

A shadow looms over me, large and threatening. He pulls my legs apart with a strong hand and I open my mouth to shriek, but he slams a palm over it.

Terror courses through me and I begin to hyperventilate. My heart thunders to life with frightening intensity.

I scream, but the only sound that comes out is a haunted muffled noise.

He expertly removes my knickers and I try kicking my legs, but he slaps them, forcing me to remain in place. His finger traces my folds and I close my eyes with shame.

"Mmm. I knew you'd be soaking wet, baby. Were you fantasizing about how I'd come through the window and deflower this tight little cunt?"

I shake my head, but I can hardly move it due to his brute strength. God, I can't believe I'm being turned on by being ambushed.

By Killian.

The psycho Killian.

The monster Killian.

The predator Killian, who'll eat me alive and scatter my bones in that firefly lake.

With the lack of light, his face is a huge shadow that's able to devour me in mere seconds.

"You're messing up my fingers and you still dare to lie to me?" His voice darkens, becoming one with the night. "Maybe you'll stop the lies when I'm pounding this cunt. You won't have the chance to lie when your blood is smeared all over my cock. You might be screaming, though, but guess what? No one will hear you."

He positions himself between my legs and chuckles, the sound low and absolutely terrifying. "Look at you dripping onto the mattress at the promise of being deflowered like a dirty little whore instead of an innocent virgin. Deep down, you like this, don't you? You want to be forced to lose control. That way, you'd be comforted by the fact that you didn't agree to this. It's your mind's way of assuming you're not the twisted one who actually fantasizes about this. It's fine, though. I'll be your villain, baby."

My eyes widen. How the hell does he know about those fantasies? I didn't even talk about them to my closest friends—not even my therapist.

"Mmm. You're grinding against my fingers again. I like it when you're horny for me." His voice lowers. "But only me. No one will see this erotic version of you. Isn't that right, baby?"

I freeze when I realize that I am in fact sliding up and down against his fingers, reaching for a forbidden type of friction.

No, no...

I seal my eyes shut and breathe heavily, internally chanting.

This is a nightmare, only a nightmare, breathe, inhale, exhale, don't let it consume you...

The weight that's been trapping me slowly disappears and the smell of wood and amber vanishes as well.

A murmur of voices follow, but I release a breath. It's a nightmare. I'm fine.

It's fine.

"Is she really asleep?" Bran's voice.

I frown. He shouldn't be in my nightmares.

"Yeah," Cecily whispers back. "You know, she barely sleeps lately and keeps staring or dreaming awake or something. It was

becoming really bad until...well, maybe a few days ago. She's constantly looking over her shoulder, but she's not zoned out."

"I've been worried sick. You have no idea," Ava says.

"Keep it down or she'll wake up," Cecily whisper-yells. "It's already a miracle that she's sleeping."

"Are you hiding it from her?" Bran sounds a bit distant, a bit hard, not like the Bran I know.

"Yeah, rest assured, she won't find that filth."

Their voices drift into one another, mixing, becoming an echo, like a giant speaker from far away.

Trepidation trickles down my spine. What's the filth Cecily mentioned?

And is this really a nightmare?

I CAN'T CONCENTRATE DURING CLASS, IN THE STUDIO, OR EVEN WHEN I talk to Dr. Ferrell on the phone.

Somehow, I can't figure out if that nightmare was real or not. Ava and Cecily said they went to sleep right after they kicked Remi and the others out, so maybe it wasn't?

I did wake up with my underwear soaked, though. Real or not, I shouldn't be aroused at the prospect of being raped.

Just what the hell is wrong with me?

Maybe the Killian from the nightmare, as terrifying as he was, is right, and I'm secretly into that?

No, nope. I'm simply not going there.

"Can you believe it?"

I lift my head at Annika's voice. It's the middle of the day, and we're sitting near the fountain with two sculpted angels pouring water into it. The plan was to soak in the sun, but it's currently playing hide-and-seek behind the clouds, so every now and then, a shadow interrupts the warmth.

Students buzz around us, dressed in all sorts of styles with their hair as colorful as the rainbow. Annika and I are probably the only ones who haven't dyed our hair.

I let my red marker draw absentmindedly on my pad and eat my sandwich with my free hand. I'm shit at having actual meals,

and Mum will lecture me for a year if she finds out I'm surviving on sandwiches and burgers and anything where I don't have to put in any effort.

Annika has a whole food container. It's filled with salad and other healthy stuff, but it looks as aesthetic as her. Even her fork and knife are purple.

She finishes chewing on her bite of food and thrusts her phone in my face. It's on IG's search, Creighton King.

A few accounts appear, but none of them belong to my cousin.

"He really has no social media. Like none. It's the same for all other platforms."

"He's not big on those."

"Is he a caveman? I'm ready to believe that he time-traveled from the past over the fact that he has no social media."

"Honestly? He might as well be."

She inches closer. "What else can you tell me about him?"

"Why are you asking?" I give her a knowing look.

"Don't give me that. I just think he's awfully Ice Age in mentality and it's my job to bring him to modern times."

"Remi's doing that just fine. He's the extrovert who adopted him, so he's like Creigh's surrogate father."

"He's too hopeless and needs two extroverts adopting him. Why is he so...silent? No matter how many questions I asked him, he flat out ignored me."

"He's not really talkative. You see him but don't hear him."

"Aww, that's just sad."

"Being quiet isn't sad, Anni. Some of us just...prefer silence."

"Are you saying I'm being too loud?"

"No. Well, a little." I sigh. "But I'm used to it from Ava, so you can talk all you want."

"Wow. I'm honored. I can't believe I'm being shamed for being energetic."

"Well, you were just shaming Cray Cray for being quiet."

"Aww, you guys call him Cray Cray? That's so cute for someone so hot."

I grin. "You think my cousin is hot?"

"Well, of course he is. Are you blind?"

"You're so straightforward. Go for it, girl."

She lets out a long sigh, then eats a bite of her salad. "I can only admire from afar. Unless I want the person I admire to be killed by my brother and father. Besides, my marriage is probably already decided. So I'm just living life for as long as I can."

"I'm sorry, Anni." Being a mafia princess must be a lot of pressure, too. Just different from the type our family names and our parents' accomplishments put on us.

She throws up a dismissive hand. "I'll think about that when the time comes. Now, I'll just be a normal college student."

"You should probably stay away from Creigh, though. He is really as you saw yesterday. There's no hidden door or a secret path."

A gleam of mischief passes through her eyes. "Or that's what you think. There's always something to discover."

"What if you're disappointed by what you discover? What if it's way different from what you bargained for?" Not sure if I'm asking for her or someone else.

"That's what makes it even more fun!"

"Suit yourself."

"Can you invite them over later? Or wait, I can ask Remi." She types a message in a conversation that seems so long. Wow. Did these two start talking only yesterday? That's basically the length of my conversations with people I've known all my life.

Anni pauses mid-typing, her expression falling. "I forgot that I have to stay with Jer tonight."

"Jeremy willingly invited you over? I thought he was actively keeping you away from his club."

"He is, but this time is different. He needs to keep an eye on me within the mansion they live in because Papa's guards have full access there."

"What's going to happen tonight?"

She searches her surroundings. "The Heathens' initiation ceremony. It happens, like, twice a year. They did a mockup at the end of the previous semester and the attendance was huge. It's brutal as hell, let me tell you."

My fingers shake at the mention of Jeremy's friends and I force them back into stillness.

Of course Killian will be the first in line for anything brutal.

"How brutal are we talking about?"

"Whatever you can't imagine. Just leave your life and dignity at the door if you want to get into this. You also need to receive the invitation text, or you can forget it."

"So they choose their potential members?"

"Of course they do. Otherwise, they'd be wasting their time with weaklings. It's why most participants are the toughest ones from The King's U. I heard they're sending a few invitations to REU students this year, but that's probably so the Heathens can use them as spies. Not sure."

"Does it get dangerous?"

"I'm sure it does. The original members would wear these neon purge mask things and terrorize the potential members so that only the strong remained. I heard that some student drove himself off a cliff after the last initiation."

The half-eaten sandwich remains suspended near my mouth as blood drains from my face. "W-what did you just say?"

Annika is completely oblivious to my state and digs her fork in her salad, the sound heightened in my overly simulated head.

"Not sure what happened, but I heard he almost got into the club, but didn't, and the next day, he drove off a cliff. They ruled it as a suicide, but you never know with these things. Like it's so easy to disguise death as anything when you have the right resources. Maybe they killed him, maybe they played with his brakes, or maybe it was just suicide. You can't dismiss any option... Oh my God, why are you crying?"

I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. Annika gets close and pats my shoulder. "Are you okay? Did you actually know him?"

Slowly, I nod. "He was my friend."

Her expression morphs to one of horror before she winces. "I'm so sorry, Glyn."

"You don't have to be." But the people who made him drive off that cliff should be.

I always wondered what made Devlin take that drastic decision, but now that I know he was part of some satanic club's initiation, it all makes sense.

Hidden hands pushed him off that cliff.

And maybe finding out exactly who's behind his death will finally give me the closure I've been searching for.

But how on earth will I be able to get an invitation?

A shadow falls over us, bigger than the casual cloud. The scent is enough to know who's behind it, and I stare up at Killian.

The sun casts a bright shadow on his face and dark hair that appears bluish under the light. The hard contours of his face mesh in a symphony of physical supremacy. And his black trousers and shirt only add to his immortal charisma.

I hate how beautiful he looks, but what I hate the most is the booming flutter in my chest upon seeing him.

Or the memory of his fingers between my legs.

Or how wet I was.

No, nope. Not the right thought to have in front of a monster who smells such emotions from a planet away.

Gathering my wits, I ask, "What are you doing here?"

"It almost sounds as if you don't want me here."

"Wow, am I that obvious?"

He narrows his eyes, "I can get any access card I want." Then he slides his attention to Annika. "Time to go, princess."

She stiffened as soon as he showed up, probably because of his relationship with her brother. "I have classes this afternoon."

"That you won't attend."

"Ugh." She glares up at him. "And why did you come to fetch me?"

"Volunteered." He grins down at me and I wish I could become one with the ground. "I can let you stay here for a bit more if you invite me to your little picnic."

"You can stay—"

Annika hasn't even finished her sentence before Killian physically barges between us and steals an olive from her.

"Is that a homage to me? It's even red." He points at what I've been sketching—an unfinished portrait.

I slam my sketchbook shut. "Not everything in this life is about you."

"Not in this life, no. But your life? Debatable."

"I'm just..." I start to mumble an excuse to leave.

"Don't be a killjoy." He waves in Annika's direction. "She only has whatever time I allow her, and then she's coming with me to be imprisoned in her ivory tower for the night. You have it in you to cut that little time off?"

I purse my lips, then reluctantly stay. This isn't for the bastard. It's for Annika, who's already looking miserable, her shoulders hunched and her movements sluggish.

"Can't she stay in the dorm with us tonight?" I ask.

"No can do."

"You guys are dictators."

A lazy grin lifts his lips. "Is that so?"

"Yeah, the worst ever. Might want to check your ego with a shrink. I can refer you to mine if you want."

He hums, the sound low in his throat. "You have a shrink?"

The question is innocent enough, but it makes me realize that I've divulged too much information.

Maybe he thinks I'm crazy. Maybe he's one of those ignorant people who thinks a shrink equals a psych ward.

Not that I care.

Jesus.

I lift my chin. "Yeah, I do."

"Refer me."

I stare at him for a second too long. Doubtful doesn't even begin to explain my emotions. "Are you for real?"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"Countless times."

"That wasn't lying. I was giving you choices. Not my fault you go for the hard ones." He nudges my shoulder with his, and I swear I nearly catch fire where he touches me. "I'm serious about the referral."

"You would willingly go to a shrink?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

Because he's too assertive in his sick ways, that's why. People who go to shrinks hope to become better, but I'm pretty sure Killian thinks this is the best version of himself.

"You realize you're sick and need therapy?" I try to take a jab at him.

"No, I just want to see the face of the person you tell your deepest, darkest secrets to."

Of course the bastard just wants to get on my nerves.

"Why are those weirdos watching you like creeps?" Anni interrupts our intense eye contact, and I break it to focus on where she's tilting her head.

I groan. "Never mind them. I'm not really liked in my class because they think I get preferential treatment for who my mum is. Even my professor likes to criticize me more than he does them. So I've just gotten used to it."

Killian hums for a beat, then stares at me. "What's the name of the professor?"

"Skies. Why are you asking?"

"Just curious." He smiles and if I were to see him on TV for the first time, I'd find him charming, crushworthy even, but unfortunately, I know what hides beneath that smile too well. "By the way, you should go to sleep early tonight. No roaming in weird places."

"What are you now, my father?"

"Shouldn't that be frowned upon in your moral code, considering I plan to fuck you?"

I choke on my own spit and Annika grins like an idiot. "Never mind me, guys. Think of me as a wallflower."

Killian doesn't seem to notice she exists in the first place.

"I mean it. No going out." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "Be good."

A shudder goes through me. I can't help it. I *really*, really can't help it and I hate how vulnerable this makes me feel.

Even as I pull away from him. As I stare at the distance and try to ignore him.

But he uses Annika to make me talk, and he asks all sorts of questions about uni and art and my professors. Whenever I refuse to answer, he starts being a wanker.

It's scary how fast he can flip from the amicable version of himself to the insufferable one.

When Jeremy calls him, he finally takes Annika and stands.

"Behave," he whispers against my forehead before planting a chaste kiss there that makes my toes curl.

My phone vibrates and I try to gather my bearings as Annika gives me a sad hug and says she'll miss us tonight.

Then she turns and leaves with Killian.

I release the breath I've been holding since he showed up and fish out my phone to find a text.

Heathens: Congratulations! You are invited to the Heathens' initiation ceremony. Please show the attached QR code upon arrival to the club's compound at four p.m. sharp.

GLYNDON

"How's my favorite grandchild?"

I grin widely while lifting my tablet higher so I can get a better view of Grandpa's face.

He's actually Dad's uncle, but he raised him after his parents' death, and, therefore, became my grandpa.

As in, my favorite person on earth.

I love my parents, but nothing compares to the complete adoration and connection I share with Grandpa. I spent my whole childhood basically living with him and Grandma Aurora. Whenever Mum and Dad took me home, he'd come to 'steal' me again.

It's a known fact that I'm his favorite grandchild. He likes Creigh and Bran and has big expectations for Eli and Lan, but I'm the only one he spoils like a princess.

After all, I'm the only female offspring in the Kings' line for a few generations.

I might feel like I'm worthless in front of Mum's and my brothers' talent. I might consider myself unfit to be in the same picture frame as them, but those feelings never exist when I'm with Grandpa.

And honestly, it should be the other way around. Jonathan King is a ruthless businessman with an empire that reaches all parts of the world. He has a reputation that leaves people trembling in his presence.

Me, however? I get all giddy. I don't see him as the cold, merciless man people describe him to be. I see him as the man

who taught me how to take my first steps, ride a bike, and bought Grandma a whole new set of special edition makeup when I decided to go rogue and painted the door with all of hers.

He still looks to be in his mid-fifties, although he's way older. Two streaks of white decorate the sides of his hair, adding a wise edge to his hard features—features that are softening as he talks to me while sitting in his home office with bookshelves behind him.

"I'm doing great, Grandpa. Studying and trying to convince my professor that not all my paintings are that horrible." I laugh in an attempt to mask the awkwardness.

He's the only one I'm willing to share my insecurities with.

"Or I can send him to the next planet where he'd wish he'd never bothered my princess."

"No, Grandpa, don't do that. I really want to convince him on my own."

I thought I was coming close today when Professor Skies wanted to speak to me alone, but then he asked me to see if Mum could make it to some gallery opening he's planning.

Not that it cut me open or anything.

Okay, maybe a little when I heard him tell his assistant teacher, "I can't believe Glyndon is *the* Astrid C. King's daughter and Landon and Brandon King's sister. Her technique is juvenile at best and so chaotic that it's embarrassing to compare her to them."

I learned long ago that being an artist means to open oneself to criticism. Mum and my brothers got their share of it, but I guess I'm not as strong as they are or confident enough to close my ears to that type of roasting.

It's why I had to talk to Grandpa right after. He makes me feel better. Mum does, too, but I don't talk to her about any art school things, because I feel as if she just wouldn't understand.

She's better.

She doesn't struggle with low self-esteem or other darker thoughts.

"If he doesn't, I'll take care of him. He's obviously a crook if he doesn't recognize your worth," Grandpa says.

"Just because he doesn't like my work doesn't mean he's a crook, Grandpa. He's world-renowned."

"He could be applauded by Picasso himself but still be a crook if he doesn't understand you're a different person from your mother and brothers." He pauses. "Is anyone else bothering you?"

"No, I'm all good. The girls and I made a new friend. But enough about me, tell me about you! Have you been taking walks and working less?"

An amused look covers his features. "Yes, Doctor."

"Well, I wouldn't have asked if you were following the doctor's instructions. I want you to live until I'm old and gray."

"If I put my mind to it, nothing will stop me." He looks up, face softening further, and soon after, Grandma appears in the frame. She stands beside his chair, wraps her hands around his face, and kisses his lips before pulling away.

Grandma has a calm, evocative beauty with her raven hair, petite features, and slim body. She's about ten years older than my parents and is a successful business owner. We often get custom-made watches from her luxurious brand and I hold them close to my heart.

Grandpa stares up at her for a beat, his eyes easing at the corners. I've always loved the way he looks at her. As if she's the only one who can melt the ice inside him. The only one who understands him in ways no one else can.

She smiles at him, then wraps an arm around his shoulder. "Glyndon! I miss you, hon. This mansion is empty as hell without you."

"Miss you, too, Grandma! I'll spend the upcoming break with you guys."

"How can it be empty when I'm right here, wild one?" Grandpa asks with a raised brow.

"Don't be jealous of your own granddaughter, Jonathan." She chuckles. "Besides, you also said you miss her energy."

"I do. Come home soon, princess."

"Will do!"

We continue talking for a bit, then I give him a report about my brothers and cousins, making them look like saints.

Sometimes, I feel like Grandpa's spy, but oh well, at least I don't tell him about all the trouble they're causing. The dangerous clubs they're in or the underground fights.

By the time I hang up, I'm buzzing with energy. I knew Grandpa would give me the pep talk I need to do this.

I've always been the rule-abiding Glyndon. The never-swim-again-after-being-hit-by-a-wave Glyndon. The peacemaker-at-family-dinners Glyndon.

In a way, I've been a wallflower and have never dared to take any risks. All I wanted was to improve my art and be recognized for it.

The brutal reality of the world crushed me so hard that I spiraled and hid into myself further. Sometimes, I miss the mischievous younger version of me or how I used Grandma's makeup as a palette.

It was innocent back then, simpler. I only loved to paint and that's it. I didn't know about the world's expectations or that I'd fail to meet each one of them.

Then I met Devlin in the first semester. We were in similar places in life and we understood each other so well.

Until we didn't.

Until he was taken away.

And I have to get closure—for him and myself.

So I put on my comfiest shoes and I slip away from the flat, thankful the girls are busy. Cecily is studying at the library and Ava has been practicing her cello. The haunting melody she's playing echoes behind me, or maybe it's my nerves that give it that edge.

The cold air covers my skin with goosebumps and I pull my denim jacket tighter around me.

I make it all the way to The King's U's campus and security lets me in once I show them the text message. It isn't until I'm inside the perimeter that I kind of start to get cold feet.

But I keep going, not sure which direction I should take. A few other students are flocking to the eastern tower of the campus, chatting among themselves. I assume they're heading to the club, considering they're all wearing eager expressions and I hear the word 'initiation.'

My steps are light as I follow close behind them.

After some time, they arrive at a black metal gate that's situated at the far right of campus. The building is separated from the rest of The King's U by wires that surround the impossibly tall walls of the property. They extend for as far as the eye can see and fog eats up the rest of the distance like an ominous scene from a horror movie.

Ravens and sparrows line up along the top of the gate and shriek in unison as they fly away.

Okay. A hundred out of a hundred on the scary factor scale.

The group of students I followed queue at the end of a long line of about thirty people.

At the gate, there are two men wearing black suits and creepy bunny masks whose lips are smeared with blood.

Fake, hopefully.

One of the bunnies seems to be checking the students' QR codes. Then upon seeing something on his device, he confiscates their phones and mechanically feels them up for other phones, cameras, or electronic devices.

All of those go into a basket with a number tag on them. Then the other bunny straps a white mask with a number on each participant's face and ties a bracelet with the same number on their wrist before letting them inside.

As my turn approaches, my whole body starts shaking. Second thoughts swarm my mind and I stare behind me, only to find others queuing on and on.

If I leave now, nothing will happen.

If I leave now...

No.

How is that different from being a coward all over again? Dev's death hit me so deep, and I couldn't deal with it for such a long time. This is my first real opportunity to get past this.

So what if there's danger? I can take it.

Not sure how I got the invitation, but maybe that's a sign to be here and finally get closure.

It's my turn to give the creepy bunny my QR code. His dark eyes scan me before he takes my phone and mechanically searches me. Once he's sure I have nothing on me, he nods to his

friend and the other bunny shoves a mask on my face and a bracelet on my wrist and points inside.

Sixty-nine.

That's my number. Blimey. What an unpleasant coincidence.

My steps are careful as I drift to what seems to be the front garden of a mansion. The giant building sits in the far distance with the imposing presence of a gothic chapel.

We're all lined up facing it, as if we're waiting for a grand opening or something. Some students chat with each other, some speaking in American accents, others in Russian and Italian. Some even in Japanese.

They are definitely all from The King's U. I don't dare speak or I would be picked up as the weakling from REU, as Anni so eloquently put it.

Instead, I focus on other students filtering in from the gates. With the masks on, we're all anonymous here, like at a twisted costume party.

Some time passes before the last participant comes inside. One hundred.

That's the number of students taking part in this fucked-up ceremony.

The gate screeches in unison with the crows as it slowly closes. I stare at it the entire time, along with the creepy bunnies who remain outside with all our belongings.

"It's finally happening," a giddy male voice, number sixty-seven, whispers to his friend, number sixty-six, in an American accent. Both of them are standing beside me, and unlike me, they're only focused on the closed doors of the first story of the mansion.

"We failed last time, but we're definitely getting in now," sixty-six says. "What do you think the challenge will be this time?"

"As long as it's not a mind game with the red or the orange mask, we'll be fine."

"You're right. Those two are brutal." Sixty-seven pauses. "But even the white mask can get tricky if he chooses to."

"Let's hope it's physical this time, but even that will get us in front of that beast. By showing up, we gave him full consent to use us as a punching bag."

Punching *what*?

I stare at the closed gate again and regret not leaving when I had the chance. Surely, they'll give us a chance to retreat, right? Because I'm definitely not going to get involved in any violence kink these bored bastards have.

Besides, isn't the fight club the place for violence?

Silence falls on the participants as the upper doors open with ceremonial noise. Then the lower ones open, too, and countless men in creepy bunny masks circle us.

And they're men. I refuse to believe that some college students are built like an ancient Greek temple.

Five figures dressed in black step out from the upper doors, all wearing black purge style masks with neon-colored stitched faces.

The orange one takes the center, the green one stands on his right, and the red on his left. The white and yellow ones occupy the sides.

Like all people present, I can't help gawking at them. They haven't done or said anything, but their aura is enough to spread both fear and dread in anyone who's watching.

I'm almost sure they're Jeremy, Killian, Nikolai, and Gareth. But who's the fifth one?

Is there another member of their club they forgot to mention?

Not that it matters right now. Seeing Killian from this position while being completely at the mercy of his games—in the literal sense this time—causes sweat to trickle down my spine.

Static fills the air before a loud modified voice echoes around us. "Congratulations for making it to the Heathens' highly competitive initiation. You are the selected elite who the leaders of the club think are worthy of joining their world of power and connections. The price to pay for such privileges is higher than money, status, or name. The reason why everyone wears a mask is because you are all the same in the eyes of the club's founders."

People start murmuring to each other, probably some rich kids who aren't used to being told that they're like everyone else.

"The price of becoming a Heathen is handing over your life. In the literal sense of the word. If you aren't willing to pay that,

please exit through the small door to your left. Once you leave, you'll lose any chance to join us again."

My head whips in the door's direction, and I can feel my legs twitching, urging me to bolt the hell out of here.

A few participants, no more than ten, get cold feet, bow their heads, and get out. The outside bunnies give them their phones and take away their masks and bracelets.

After a moment, the door closes with a low creak and the man on the speaker goes again. "Congratulations again, ladies and gentlemen. We should now begin our initiation."

Silence and anticipation fill the air as he continues, "Tonight's game is predator and prey. You'll be hunted down by the club's founding members. That will be five to ninety, so you have the upper hand. If you manage to reach the edge of the property before they hunt you down, you'll be a Heathen. If not, you'll be eliminated and escorted out."

Hunted down?

What the hell is this? Do they take us for animals?

"The founding members have the right to use any methods available to hunt you down—including violence. If their weapon of choice touches you, you'll be automatically eliminated. Bodily harm can and will happen. You are also allowed to inflict violence on the founding members—if you can. The only rule is not taking a life. Not intentionally, at least. No questions are allowed and no mercy shall be granted. We don't want any weaklings in our ranks."

Wait. Weapons? What the hell does he mean by weapons?

Maybe I should've left, after all.

"You have a ten-minute head start. I suggest you run. The initiation has officially begun."

Many around me bolt in all directions and I remain rooted in place—the severity of the situation finally dawning on me.

I stare up at the people in masks, who don't move from their positions, watching the unfolding commotion, shuffling of feet, and excited sounds.

My fingers twitch, but I turn around and do what I've never done before.

I let my instincts take over.

I run.

KILLIAN

"Look at them acting like cattle," I mutter under my breath as the five of us stand still, watching the scattering of prey in a splash of chaos.

The air reeks of greed, fear, and potential crime. My demons' favorite flavors.

The whole concept behind the club means fuck all to me. Occasions like these are the only reason I even participate.

"Motherfucking salivating is the word you're looking for, Kill. I'm gonna break some bones and drag fuckers across the ground. If anyone dares to stop me, they'll meet the same fate." Nikolai clenches and unclenches his fist, unable to hide his excitement for the hunt.

When we first discussed this initiation, I suggested this game. After Jeremy put it to vote, there was a unanimous agreement from the rest—my boring brother included.

Considering the bow and arrows strapped to his back, he might not be as averted to violence as I previously thought. He just prefers doing it in closed circles.

Like how we used to go hunt with Dad once upon a time.

"That rubber on the arrows, Gaz?" Nikolai pokes the tips. "This probably won't hurt as much. Pick something else."

"It'll do." My brother does a whole body search of Nikolai. "Where's your weapon?"

He punches the air. "I prefer my fists."

"You won't be able to win with your fists." Jeremy swings his golf club, points at my baseball bat, and then at the chain White

Mask is holding. "We'll be able to hunt more than you."

"That's what you think." He grabs the railing, shoves his mask against one of the cameras, and screams at the security who are watching every nook and cranny of the property. "You better keep the right count for each of us, motherfuckers, or I'll skin your balls for dinner."

"Hannibal Lecter much?" Gareth deadpans.

Nikolai's head swings in his direction. "You! Don't even think about intervening or playing the fucking pacifist tonight, cousin. I mean it."

Swinging the bat over my shoulder, I step in the direction of the door.

"Where are you going?" Jeremy asks from behind me. "The ten minutes aren't up yet."

I grin from beneath my mask but don't look back. "Since when do we play fair?"

His low chuckle and Nikolai's shouts about needing to jump down mix, then fade to nothingness.

My ears fill with the buzz of the hunt.

When I was young and Dad figured out he had a 'defective' on his hands, he took me hunting, probably figuring out that it'd help dull my urges.

He taught me how to stalk prey and focus my energy on becoming a human hound. But over the years, the excitement of hunting animals slowly withered and became dull.

It's different with people, though.

Tonight is one of the few occasions where I don't have to repress my compulsions and can allow my cravings to break their boundaries and roam loose.

Usually, monotonous emotions and an endless circle of boredom trap me in their clutches. My demons will chant, twist, and writhe, urging me to commit any fucked-up act just to drive it all away.

Not today.

Today, they don't have to scream or bang or flounder in misery. Today, they have full control to act in their nature.

My nature.

The late afternoon stakes its claim on the premises. Due to the disappearance of the sun behind a thick cloud, the forest has turned a dark green and my favorite smell taints the air.

Fear.

Despite the 'game' nature of this hunt, the prey is well aware of being hunted down by predators. Their pores are open, overflowing with sweat, adrenaline, and pure uncut terror.

I stand in the middle of the front yard, close my eyes, and inhale the smell deep into my lungs.

An inexplicable intoxication seethes in my veins at being able to taste fear, knowing I'm the reason it's there in the first place. These occasional doses of depravity allow me to have enough balance to blend into society without turning serial killer on them.

I stop myself from killing by hunting and planning for hunting.

Or lately, by the promise of owning a certain girl.

My muscles tighten, and a blasphemous thought slowly forms in my brain. Like maybe I should sneak into Glyndon's room instead of hunting wannabes.

No.

I waited months for today and I'm simply not allowing distractions to sway me.

Letting my gaze fall on the dirt path, I head north and smirk when I find countless shoe marks in the dirt, leading to the forest surrounding the property.

People are biologically designed to follow the direction of their internal compass—north. Those who choose differently either have skewed direction sense or just go against the flow to feel smart.

"Numbers seventy-four and eighteen eliminated." The speaker goes off in the distance.

Hmm.

Looks like the others have already started.

That doesn't affect me one bit. Winning is only a bonus—not the actual purpose. Hunting is.

I take my time following a group of people who thought forming a tribe was a good idea.

Tracking steps has come naturally to me ever since I started hunting as a kid. The key is to seek the most vulnerable prey. The

ones whose shoes make the deepest holes in the ground, because they're so scared, they put all their weight into escaping.

I run in the direction they took, my breathing regulated—normal—as if I'm not physically exerting myself. A rustle comes from the tree ahead and I swing my bat and hit.

A masculine wail comes first before a body falls with a thud, clutching his shoulder. The crunching sound that echoes in the air causes my blood to boil and the level of endorphins to mount inside me.

He continues crying like a little bitch and I merely step on him as I continue my run.

"Number fifty-one eliminated," comes from the speaker.

I slow down when I reach a clearing that's mostly exempt from trees and let my bat dig into the ground as I tilt my head to the side.

The steps go in circles, then explode in different directions.

Wait.

No.

It's a camouflage. Judging by the exaggerated footsteps, they knew some of us could track them so they created an illusion to make me believe they went everywhere.

Oh, they're good. They must've been in other initiations before.

Judging by the number of steps that are half-covered, instead of forward, they should be—

A thump echoes in my ear and it's then I feel the scorching pain ringing in my skull. A warm liquid trails down my forehead underneath the mask, turns my vision red, then slides down my chin and drips onto the ground.

I slowly turn around and face the group of five white-masked students. One of them holds the rock he hit me with, breathing as harshly as a pig being led to slaughter.

"Good one." I grin beneath my mask, and even though they can't see how unhinged I am, they must hear it in my voice.

I lift my bat and they all flinch backward, but I use it to tap the back of my head. "You should've hit here and with more force so you could get at least a seventy percent chance of knocking

me out. Oh, and your hand is shaking. Unless you steady it, you won't be able to land a successful blow."

Mask twelve stares at his hand and I lift the bat and hit him in the head, sending him flying sideways. "Like that."

He's out cold, and his friends all run forward, together, like a fucking herd.

I swing the bat and aim at their legs, all at the same time, and they fall into a heap on the ground.

One of them manages to escape, but instead of running, he turns around and mutters, "I surrender! I surrender! You can just tap me."

"Why would I do that? You signed up for this, no? It's your duty to make it more entertaining." I drag the bat on the ground, letting him hear the crunching of wood against the tiny pebbles, then when I'm in front of him, I hit him across the middle. "Boring cunt."

"Number eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen are eliminated," the speaker announces.

I stare at the gray sky and tsk. "Come on, give me an actual challenge."

Someone breezes past me and I throw the bat as if it's an arrow, whacking them from behind.

Seriously? I internally sigh, still staring at the sky. *I said a challenge, not a stray rabbit.*

The one I hit doesn't fall. I wait for the speaker to announce their number, but nothing comes.

I stare at them again, only to see they used one of the other unconscious bodies as a shield. The bat hit number fifteen and fell to the ground.

The participant doesn't look back as they continue running, slowly disappearing into the trees.

I didn't even get a good look at them.

Well, fuck me.

Here it is. A challenge.

I grab my bat from the ground and stare down in search of their footsteps.

They're...light. Barely there.

Either it's a woman or a very slim man.

And it's definitely someone who knows how to fucking run.

I crouch on my haunches to study the pattern of their shoes. Nike running sneakers.

Well, well. Aren't they too prepared for this?

Still, a slow grin stretches my lips as I stalk in the direction they've taken. Then I break into a run, adrenaline tightening my muscles. The promise of an actually delicious prey causes my blood level to flatline.

My breathing comes in long intervals, in sync with my regulated heartbeat.

People's bodies and brains fly in chaotic patterns when they're excited. Their nervous activity will peak and their heartbeats skyrocket.

Not me.

Excitement brings me a level of calm nothing else can accomplish.

The closest thing I have to...peace.

It's the exact same feeling I had when I cut open those mice or when I went on my first hunt. Or when I started taking pictures to document those moments of utter rapture.

Or when I have Glyndon completely at my mercy and she doesn't break eye contact.

It's the sensation of not having to repress any part of my true nature, of allowing it to run loose like all-encompassing smoke.

Once you see it, it's too late.

A scream comes from behind me and another from the side, mixing like a symphony of violence. The numbers of eliminations mesh up together until they overlap.

The devil works fast, but Heathens work faster.

I don't focus on their endeavors. Instead, I continue my pursuit of the cunning thing who keeps running in zigzags in between trees.

The more I chase them, the stronger my blood pumps and my breathing regulates.

Just you wait until I catch you, I'll have a field day with you.

A figure cuts in front of me and I come to an abrupt halt despite my high speed so that I don't crash into them.

Participant number eighty-nine screeches to a halt, too. A man—judging from his figure. He remains rooted in place like a statue, but he's shaking uncontrollably.

Nikolai appears from behind, his neon yellow mask a bit crooked, blood smeared over the stitched smiling lines and the X's at his eyes. Even his hands are all red, indicating all the fun he's had.

Eighty-nine stares behind him, and for a moment, he makes the mistake of taking a step in my direction, probably thinking I'm the lesser of two evils.

"Look, I caught a stray cat." Nikolai tells me with a slight manic edge. He's definitely in the high mode right now. "He just wouldn't stop running, you know, and has a temper. Threw a whole fucking branch at my face and nearly knocked me out. Gotta love the motherfucking feisty ones. They're so fun to break into pieces."

Tell me about it.

I slide my gaze over eighty-nine, then to his shoes. Not Nike. He can't be the one who escaped earlier.

And my job here is done.

I lift the bat to get him when he keeps approaching me, but Nikolai practically jumps him from behind, locks him in a chokehold, and drags him back into the darkness between the trees.

Eighty-nine tries to struggle by elbowing and biting into Nikolai's arm. He's a fighter, I'll give him that, but he's simply no match for my cousin's deranged strength.

Nikolai effortlessly drags him and eighty-nine's legs leave a long trail in the dirt and his screams are muffled by something Nikolai's done.

Shaking my head, I continue on my way in pursuit of my own stray rabbit. I'm not two steps in when a *swish* breaks the silence. I duck as an arrow hits a tree, right above me.

I whip my head to the side, but don't see anything. When I pull the arrow out, I see that it's a real one, not the rubber ones Gareth is using for the hunt.

Well, well. Looks like my older brother might be in the mood to kill me.

That is, if he's the one who shot this, which I doubt—he's too cowardly for such a daring move.

I break the broadhead off the arrow and slip it in my pocket to investigate it later—that is, if whoever aimed this at me doesn't come back for a redo.

My steps are measured with the sole purpose of finding the little rabbit. Murder attempts can wait.

Jeremy and I meet as we're running in different directions and we butcher about six participants combined.

Then I catch a glimpse of Gareth walking with one of the participants, shooting anyone who crosses their path.

He doesn't even attempt to eliminate that participant. If anything, it's like he's...protecting them.

No, escorting them.

Hmm. I wonder who got my brother's attention to that extent?

I shelf that for later and continue my hunt.

For some reason, I can feel the stray rabbit escaping in the area parallel to me.

So I follow my instincts and go deeper into the forest. It's a more difficult path, but those who believe longer and safer is better than shorter and dangerous would definitely come in this direction.

I carefully follow the footsteps, my vision getting sharper with every passing second.

My feet come to a slow halt between three trees. The sneakers have made a circle here, but unlike those amateurs from earlier, this one obviously doesn't know I follow steps, so they didn't attempt to hide them.

On and on, they went in circles and then...

I stare at the path ahead. The most logical explanation is that they jumped on the rock in front of me and chose the bushes.

I stride to that direction as I smirk, letting them believe I've fallen for their trick.

It's time to skin the rabbit alive.

GLYNDON

Ever since the stupid initiation started, I've been feeling like Alice in Wonderland.

The amount of fuckery I witnessed in my attempts to keep a low profile is astounding.

I've wondered this before, but now, I'm sure.

The members of the Heathens are batshit crazy.

I saw the one in the neon yellow mask single-handedly beat like ten people to a pulp, with no weapon, then he laughed derangedly if anyone attempted to hit him.

Then, someone dressed all in black, including his mask, tilted his head at me and waved slowly, manically, and I swear I've never run faster in my life.

I thought that was the highest level of crazy, but I was proven wrong. As I hid behind a rock, I witnessed the white-masked one strap three people with a chain as they begged and wailed.

And then the most disturbed of the lot finished five with a baseball bat and I made the mistake of thinking running at that moment was better than staying in place to keep him from finding me.

When he threw the bat in my direction with the lethality of a sniper, I have no damn clue how I thought fast enough to use one of the unconscious students as a shield, then continue my run.

I definitely work best under pressure, dammit. Because I didn't even focus on the burning of my muscles as I sprinted and jumped and used the amount of energy that could last me for months.

Despite my art student status, I'm actually a good runner and I love to jog, so I can at least trust myself to keep going whenever it gets to be too much.

Just how the hell did the dainty Devlin make it in this jungle? Though it probably wasn't a full-on hunting session back during the initiation he participated in.

And the worst part in all of this? No, it's not the screams, the wails, or the muffled sounds—although those still make me flinch every time. It's not the sound of impersonalized speakers announcing the elimination of numbers.

It's, in fact, feeling like a prey to that red fucking mask who keeps trailing my every move like a professional hunter. I made beelines, circles, and even went in chaotic lines, but he stayed hot on my trail every time.

My last resort was choosing a deserted rocky road that's filled with tall trees. I could feel him close behind, so I found my current hiding place.

The tree.

I climbed it, pretending it was the treehouse back home that Landon taught me how to climb up for sport.

This pine tree is gigantic, though. It's so tall that when I stare down, a slight acrophobia grabs hold of me.

But I rationalize that back to the fact that I'm not truly afraid of heights and this is just my anxiety taking center stage.

Inhaling deep, I wait a moment before releasing a long exhale. Red Mask follows the rocky path, probably thinking I continued on my way to the finish line.

I'm so glad I decided to stop and hide here for now. Hearing all the eliminations, I doubt there are many of the participants left. So I'd rather take it slower than rush into it and end up losing.

And seriously, I wouldn't be able to get anywhere with this wanker tirelessly on my tail. Shouldn't he be hunting the others instead of focusing on one?

The most important part is that he's gone now. I watch his back disappear behind the trees and narrow my eyes. I'm ninety percent sure it's Killian, especially due to the mask's color, but he

couldn't have known I'd be here or specifically pick me as a target, right?

I shudder at the thought of what he'll do if he finds out I've come to his club's initiation.

He told me to be good and I definitely didn't listen. If my past interactions with him are of any indication, this will end badly.

A sudden chill goes through me and I rub a hand against the side of my shorts while the other holds the branch for dear life.

Forget it. I'm simply not going to think about Killian right now.

I wait for a few minutes, until my feet and hands start to ache, then when I'm sure he's most definitely gone, I slowly climb down. It's easy to climb trees. All you have to do is make sure you have a strong foothold and that you're holding a solid branch.

Once I'm halfway there, I peek down to measure the distance and shriek when I find a neon red mask staring up at me with a chilling calm.

Shit.

Shit.

The asshole must've been waiting for me to come out from my hiding spot. I didn't trick him into thinking I went in the opposite direction. He knew where I was the entire time and he's the one who tricked me into showing myself.

I make a snap decision and climb up. It doesn't matter if I stay at the top of this tree for a whole night as long as I stay away from the crazy bastard.

I'm not a meter up when something hits the branch I'm holding on to. The bat.

He threw it at the branch, causing it to snap in two. My foot slips and I grab the void in my attempts to catch another branch. The fall happens in slow motion and I feel every hit of air against my skin and the horrifying speed I'm sinking with.

I screw my eyes shut for the fall. I'm definitely going to break a bone or two—

However, instead of the ground I expect to greet me, my entire body is enveloped by a strong grip. The cocoon I'm caught in sways a little from the thud of my fall but remains sturdy.

Cold air hits my face, and I realize it's because my mask has been removed.

"So it is you. I had a feeling when I saw your little white panties through your shorts but couldn't be sure." His voice darkens to a chilling edge. "I thought I told you to be good and stay put tonight."

I slowly open my eyes to find myself completely wrapped in Killian's arms. The neon red mask with a stitched smile makes him appear frightening, manic even.

His muscles tighten around me until it's almost suffocating, and I hate how glad I am for him catching me. Or how warm it feels in his embrace. It shouldn't be like this.

Not when he's the most ice-cold person I know.

"What the hell were you thinking when you broke the branch?" I breathe harshly, still under the spine-curling sensation of falling. "I could've dropped on the rock."

"Which you didn't, because I caught you. Now, tell me, Glyndon. What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I got an invitation."

He remains silent, but I can see him narrow his eyes through the mask. "Bullshit."

"I really did. You can find it in my phone that your creepy bunnies confiscated. Seriously, why did it have to be bunnies? They're supposed to be cute, and you guys ruined their image by making them grotesque."

"You're the one who's cute when you're nervous. Can't stop talking, huh?"

"Shut up and let me down."

"No can do. How else are you going to pay for defying me if I release you?"

"Why...would I pay for anything?"

"Try again and in a less spooked tone, because your nervousness turns me on."

"You're sick."

"And you're a broken record." He shoves his face against the side of my throat so he's literally breathing down my neck, his hot breaths triggering my hitched breaths. "Why are you here, Glyndon?"

"I told you, I got an invitation," I try to speak normally, but my voice comes out lower than usual.

"Do you attend every dangerous event you get invited to?"

"I just...got curious." There's no way I'll tell him about Devlin when he could be in on the conspiracy with the rest of the club about his death.

His eyes darken behind the mask, and with the neon red, they're downright terrifying. It's like he's taking his predator role way too seriously.

Or maybe it's not a role for him. Maybe it's his true self and whatever he shows the outside world is the actual role.

His voice echoes in the silence around us like a twisted melody. "Maybe you didn't only get curious. Maybe you wanted the danger and to see for yourself what it means to be on that cloud of adrenaline. Maybe you just wanted to be hunted like an animal and then captured and ravaged in the most barbaric way. Is that what you wanted, little rabbit?"

I frantically shake my head, refusing to come to terms with the chills that cover my body or the tightening between my legs that's been intensifying with each of his words.

"Are you telling me that if I rip your shorts and touch your cunt, I won't find it soaking wet like when I came through your window last night?"

I freeze.

Wait...what?

Did he just say that last night he came through my window? As in, that nightmare was real?

He puts me to my feet and some pebbles crunch beneath my shoes as I sway a little, both from the shock of the realization and the loss of his warmth.

I swear to God this bastard is playing a mind trick on me.

He has to be.

Right?

He towers over me, the sight of his mask adding more to his downright horrifying existence. "Your little body was writhing beneath me, you all but tried to ride my hand, remember?"

"That's not true," I whisper more to myself than to him. "I didn't."

"You hate it, don't you? How much you want what I have to offer, how you ache for that feeling of letting go as you're ravaged

whole. For a moment, you want to stop being a good girl and just let whatever lurks inside you loose, isn't that right?"

"I don't want you." I shake my head over and over, stepping back. "I don't. I refuse to. I won't."

"Look at you being adorable." Both darkness and amusement laces his tone. "Didn't I say your nervousness turns me on? Let's add your denial, too."

My gaze automatically goes to his trousers and I nearly choke at the sight of the tent that's bulging against the material. "Don't, Killian."

"Mmm. I really do love the sound of my name in your sweet little voice."

I keep stepping back, but he matches my strides with nonchalant ones. "Would you stop if I begged you?"

"No."

"If I scream?"

"I'll just muffle it."

"If I hit you?"

"It'll just piss me off and my actions will turn drastic. Highly not recommended."

My shoes hit a rock and I yelp as I trip, but he grabs my elbow, keeping me upright.

"Stop acting like you don't want it, Glyn. All the dramatics are starting to get on my last nerve."

"Please," I whisper.

"Begging holds the importance of a fly to me."

"Then what is important to you?"

"Right now? You and your virgin cunt."

I want to scream, both from frustration and anger, at my reaction to his words. How can I want someone I hate? Someone who, without any sliver of doubt, fucking scares me?

And deep down, I know he just won't stop until he takes my virginity. It's a conquest, and he's a true predator.

One with no limits.

Taking a deep breath, I choose another approach. "What if I told you that I need more time?"

"Hmm." His finger taps on the side of my elbow. "You think I don't know what you're doing? You're stalling so you can get more

time to find a solution to get rid of me, but I'm telling you right now, it's not going to work."

"I just...want more time, please."

His eyes flash with annoyance, probably too used to getting what he wants only to be told no, and I'm almost sure he'll bend me over and fuck me anyway, but he releases my elbow. "Since you asked nicely, fine."

"Really?"

"Do you want me to change my mind?"

"No." I smile. "Thanks."

"See? I can be nice."

I snort, then puff out a breath and whisper, "Nice, my arse."

"I heard that."

I grin in an attempt to shoo the situation away. "Why do you do all of this?"

"All of this?"

"Being part of the Heathens, hunting down people. All of this."

"Why are you asking?"

Despite my attempts for it not to, my body relaxes. "You keep pursuing me, but I know nothing about you aside from your being in the Heathens and a med student."

A gleam of light flashes in his eyes. "Have you been asking about me, baby?"

"Didn't have to. Annika doesn't stop talking once she has a topic of discussion."

"But you listened." His gloating tone pisses me off.

"So?"

"I thought you weren't interested."

I'm obviously drawn to him in ways I can't understand, but it'll be a cold day in hell before I admit that.

"Or maybe you're just not interested in admitting it out loud." His stance turns nonchalant as he seems to enjoy himself.

"Are you going to answer my question?"

"Concerning?"

"Aren't med students supposed to protect their hands? Yet you fight and hunt and do all types of fuckeries that could get you hurt."

He lifts his hands and studies them under the gloomy light as if it's the first time he's seen them. "The world is painted in different colors, depending on the angle you see it from. Every single ideal can be turned monstrous when it's pushed to the limits. I'm the limits. I'm the edges humans are warned to stay away from but are attracted to anyway, because it's just so different from what they know. And because I'm permanently on the edge, I need constant stimuli to remain functioning. Fighting, hunting, and being a doctor-in-the-making are those stimuli."

So that's his obsession. His way of driving away the emptiness is through unconventional methods. I understand why he has to do this, though I don't agree with it.

His view of the world is fascinating, and if I didn't want to escape him, I could listen to him talk about it all day.

"Why medicine, then? Its codes imply that you should save people."

"And I do, after I see inside them." His lips curve in a cruel smirk. "Look at your face becoming all horrified. Do I scare you, baby?"

"No." I lift my chin. "I'm a King. We aren't born to be scared of people."

"Hmm. I like the whole family slogan thing. Are you close with them? Your family, I mean?"

"So what if I am?"

"Do they know you were thinking about throwing yourself off that cliff?"

I startle, my whole body going rigid. "I-I don't know what you're talking about."

"That night, you had this dead look in your eyes, like someone who was tired—not bored, just fucking exhausted." He steps toward me and I retreat, matching his steps. "Did you think about how it'd feel at the bottom of that ocean with your head cracked against the rocks? How you'd be asphyxiated by the water for minutes on end? Death by drowning is the most difficult. You open your mouth, bubbles will float, but water is the only thing you'll get into your lungs. You think you want to die, but the more you breathe in water and choke on it, the more you'll regret it. So

tell me, Glyndon, did you imagine that everything would be over if you just...let go?"

He's...really a psycho, isn't he?

There's no way a normal person would talk so casually about such a topic, and with great detail, no less.

I slap both hands against his chest. "Stop it."

"You're trembling, baby. Did I hit a nerve?"

I glare up at him. "You have no right to judge me."

"I'm not. I'm trying to get to know you better, like you did to me earlier."

This bastard is escalating again. He didn't like that I was asking questions, so he decided to go for the jugular to teach me a lesson.

Too bad for him, I'm not backing down.

"Couldn't you just ask what my favorite color, band, and film are?"

"You don't have a favorite color, since you wear all of them. Your favorite band is Nirvana since you have their songs in all your Instagram stories. Your favorite movie is *Inception*, per a painting you posted a year ago on your IG that was captioned, 'Inspiration by my favorite film ever, *Inception*.' You also love chocolate and cherry flavor ice cream—together—your paternal grandfather, and the shorts and tank top style. You have an inferiority complex due to your mother's and brothers' talent, which makes you look more and more uncomfortable in family pictures as time goes by. It probably started early on and accumulated over the years until it drove you to that cliff."

My nails dig into his chest, wanting—no, needing—to inflict pain. "How...how the hell do you know all of that?"

"I'm good at observing and linking patterns."

"A stalker, you mean."

"If you prefer that label." He wraps a hand around mine, pinning it on his chest. "You're still shaking. Would you like me to drop the subject and let you go back to your safe cocoon like Little Miss Ostrich—"

"I didn't want to kill myself." I cut him off. "Yes, I've thought about it often, when the pain gets to be too much and I want it to just stop, but I still wouldn't do it, because I'd regret it. I'd feel

shitty for putting my family and friends through that, and maybe it wouldn't work. What if the pain doesn't stop, after all? What if it becomes tenfold worse?"

"You won't feel anything postmortem."

I snort, actually feeling light for talking to a heartless monster about it instead of someone who'd be hurt by my words. "Is that your idea of consolation?"

"I don't know how to do that, but here's what I do know." He strokes my hand that's beneath his. "I'll make sure you never have those thoughts again."

"Says the one who asked me to throw myself off a cliff so he could take a picture of my fall."

"But you didn't. As you said, you don't want to kill yourself, and I believe you."

My lips part. He...what?

Why would he believe me? Even I don't believe myself sometimes. There's an unreliable narrator in my head who keeps flinging me in all directions.

Forget it.

I'm simply not getting trapped in the web Killian is spinning.

Trying to remain nonchalant, I remove my hand from his hold.

"Can you let me finish the initiation now?"

He taps a finger against his thigh. "Why are you so interested in joining our club?"

"Isn't that where all the cool kids go?"

"Nice try, but no, it obviously isn't your scene."

"Because I'm a girl?"

"And a nerd and a scaredy-cat and an introvert. You name it."

"I...can change."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?"

"Why would you change? You're fine the way you are."

My breath gets caught at the back of my throat. I'm pretty sure he didn't mean it as a compliment, which is why it sounds even more like a compliment. Dammit.

The effect he has on me isn't funny anymore.

"I just want to join the club and add more fun to my life."

"I'll be all the fun you need."

"Arrogant prick."

"Heard worse."

"Come on, let me join."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so. Besides..." He shoves me against the tree and his arms cage me in from both sides. "You owe me one for being nice just now."

His hand wraps around my waist and he pushes his erection against my stomach. The air crackles with tension as his cock slides up and down the sensitive flesh of my mound.

Clothes separate us, but I feel every stroke to the deepest part of me.

"You...said you'd give me time." I choke on the word, not able to recognize my voice from the thickness of it.

"And I will. This has nothing to do with that." He pulls down my top's strap and it reveals the lace of my bra.

"Mmm. Red. Were you thinking of me when you covered these tits with my favorite color? Did you touch yourself in front of the mirror and come with my name on your lips."

"N-no..." My shaky fingers slap against his chest, so utterly weak. "And how does this have nothing to do with it when you're obviously touching me?"

"Never said I wouldn't. I just said I wouldn't take your virginity—for now." He pulls down the other strap and glides his fingers against my bra until he finds the tips of my breasts. "Look at these little nipples being all hard before I've even touched them."

He yanks down the bra to my stomach and I briefly close my eyes as my breasts bounce free. My nipples ache with want, hard and throbbing.

Maybe he's right and I'm way worse than I thought.

His thumb and forefinger wrap around a nipple and twist. I shudder and clamp my lips against a moan as a zap of pleasure trickles down my stomach and to my pulsing pussy.

"Your tits are gorgeous, baby. All creamy and pink, not to mention they fit perfectly in my hands." He cups them both, each in a strong palm as if to prove a point. "Mmm. So perky and beautiful, I want to torture them a little."

He pinches a nipple and I whimper and pretend to push him away, but he pinches again, hard.

I scream, my back flinching against the harshness of the tree. He strokes the nipple, humming in that dark voice, "So sensitive, my little rabbit. I like it."

He pinches and tugs with brute force, then strokes the pain away like a caring lover. The alternation between pain and pleasure leaves me hazy, and my trembling legs threaten to drop me.

"I bet you're all soaking wet." He reaches into my shorts and I bite my lip as his hand meets my underwear. "So fucking drenched, baby. Maybe I should acquaint your cunt with my cock, after all. They obviously need the introduction."

I stiffen, my heartbeat skyrocketing. "You said you'd give me time."

"Time is proportional and not exact. In fact, time can be fifteen minutes."

My heart shrivels with a pang of disappointment that expands all the way to my dropping stomach.

I should've never believed him. I *really* shouldn't have.

Despite the fear coursing through me, I glare at him. "Do whatever the fuck you want. Just know that I'll never trust you. Never."

"Relax." His voice is casual, easy, even as he rubs both his fingers and his erection against my pussy. "I'll keep my word."

For some reason, he sounds sincere, but I know better than to trust the unhinged bastard blindly.

"On the other hand, you'll give me your mouth."

"What?"

He points at my mask that's on the ground. "Sixty-nine is a beautiful number. It's fate, don't you think?"

My face heats and I stare at him. "More like an unfortunate coincidence."

He chuckles and slowly pushes me to the ground. I inspect our surroundings, my heart pounding stronger than usual. "What if someone comes along?"

"I'll blind their eyes for looking at you naked."

I want to think he's joking, but I already know that Killian is the worst type of monster to ever exist.

A gorgeous monster.

A terrifying monster that my body mysteriously comes alive for.

My back meets the grass and I stare up to find the neon mask staring down at me, his knees on either side of my face.

From this position, he looks like a character from those slasher movies. A hedonistic, soulless devil.

He unbuckles his trousers and pulls out his very hard cock with purple veins on the side. I'm lightheaded and can't help thinking about that first time on the cliff—how he thrust inside, how he eventually took control and fucked my face.

It seems like ages ago now.

And I can probably admit that strange arousal was due to being threatened with death if I didn't give him what he wanted.

It's still the same Killian from back then, the dark, unhinged Killian. Now that I'm familiar with his nature, I found out just how deranged he could get, so how come I'm not as apprehensive anymore?

On the contrary, my thighs tremble and clench at the promise of what's to come.

Is he brainwashing me?

Or maybe the gloomy, creepy setting is playing with my head.

"Can't you remove the mask?"

"Why? Is it scaring you?"

If I say yes, he most definitely won't remove it, and if I say no, then he'll have no reason to remove it.

"I want to see your face," I murmur. Because yeah, his face, as frightening as it is, is better than a mask.

"I'll consider it if you make this good. Now, open. I need your lips on my cock, baby."

I slowly do, my heart hammering. He slides inside, inch by inch, and I start licking. I'm still absolutely clueless on how to give a blowjob, but I'm supposed to be doing this, right?

He pulls out, tscking. "Don't just lick it like it's a Popsicle."

Killian shoves three of his fingers in my mouth and deep-throats me, hooking against my tongue and twirling it. My legs

jerk and I swear I've never been as turned on in my life as I am right now.

"Use your tongue for friction and quicken your pace. Don't worry if you think you're being too quick. You won't hurt me." He pops out his fingers, leaving a trail of saliva between them and my mouth, and before I can say anything, he shoves his cock back inside.

Harder this time.

Stronger.

My gag reflex kicks in, but I breathe through it and keep up, twirling my tongue like he told me to, over and over until my jaw hurts, but I don't stop. I lick him with everything in me.

"Fuck, baby, that's it. Mmm. You're doing great." His fingers get lost in my hair, digging into my skull. He keeps me immobile as he thrusts in and out, hitting deeper every time.

I reach out to get a better hold of his huge erection, but he tsks again. "No touching, just your mouth."

My brow creases and I let my hands fall on either side of me. Seeming pleased with me abandoning the idea of touching him, Killian lifts the mask off his face and throws it away.

And I regret my words from earlier.

A trail of blood trickles from his temple, over his lids, and down his cheek and jaw, giving him a strikingly dangerous edge.

He probably got it during all the hunting, but that's not why I regret telling him to show me his features, it's his face, dammit.

And how utterly handsome he is.

If he looked creepy earlier, then now, he's a downright cruelly beautiful monster as he brutally drives in and out of my mouth.

He's definitely not the type who finishes fast, even with the maddening rhythm he's going at.

He cups my jaw then uses a finger to wipe across my bottom lip. "I love your mouth when it's stuffed with my cock. You're my perfect little cum hole, aren't you?"

Logically, I should be offended, but the exact opposite happens. My pussy clenches and I rub my legs together in both shock and embarrassment.

"This mouth belongs to me now and you'll let me use it whenever I please, won't you?" He tightens his hold on my jaw

and forces me to nod. "That's a 'Yes, Killian, my mouth and my every other hole are yours to use and fill up with cum.'"

I think I'm going to orgasm from his filthy words alone.

Could he not have a commentary about everything? Though I'm definitely on the edge from the dark, erotic, and yet completely casual way he says things like that.

He's like a different species all on his own.

My jaw hurts from how long I've been sucking him off. He's clearly enjoying it, judging by the groans and the occasional "Just like that, baby." But there's no sign of him finishing anytime soon.

His rhythm is insane and I can't help being entranced and dripping in my knickers from just watching his pleasure. Is it normal that the thought of his orgasm is enough to make me get close to my own release?

Killian pulls out of my mouth and I think he'll come, but then he maneuvers us so we're lying sideways. Then he thrusts in again. My jaw still hurts, so I wince and nearly bite him.

I halt, my eyes widening.

"No teeth. Do it properly, little rabbit. Unless you want me to switch to your cunt instead?" I shake my head and pick up my rhythm.

He groans and I release a sigh, but it gets stuck in my throat when he lowers my shorts and knickers.

I don't realize what's going on until a loud sucking sound echoes in the air. I gasp around his cock as my whole body ignites.

"Stop and I'll stop," he whispers against my folds. "I'd hate to see this tight little cunt go unsatisfied."

I muster up everything in me and suck as enthusiastically as I physically can.

He peppers kisses on my folds, then sucks on them with the expertise of a wicked sex god. I'm not completely used to that when he licks all the way to my slit and then down again. He whispers against my most sensitive skin, "Such a fast learner, my Glyndon."

Then he drives his tongue inside me and pinches my clit.

I don't know if it's that or the way he called me his Glyndon, but I come uncontrollably, without any ounce of shame.

My hips jerk into his devilish mouth as he keeps thrusting in and out. My moans are muffled by his cock and it's so erotic that I can't help licking while moaning.

I think he likes it, too, because I feel him thickening inside my mouth with each moan.

Killian glides his tongue all the way out of my pussy and I clench, as if trying to keep him there.

"You taste like my new favorite meal." He slides out from between my lips, grabs me by the hair, and tugs me to a sitting position. My eyes widen as he stands up and rams into my mouth again with a ruthlessness that leaves me breathless.

"So fucking good," he mutters between merciless thrusts. "Not a bad idea to satiate you first. You're oozing with sexuality and looking more and more like my favorite new fucktoy. The sweet little girl who never sucked a dick before, never had sex before, is now being deep-throated by me. You like how I'm confiscating all your control and using you to get off. In fact, you love it so much that you're clenching your legs for another orgasm."

I freeze, realizing what I've been doing, and Killian's dark chuckle fills our surroundings.

"Look at you being all adorable." With a hand in my hair, he pounds one final time and I can feel him stiffening before a salty taste explodes at the back of my throat.

Killian keeps his cock deep inside as I try to swallow everything.

"That's it," he muses. "Every last drop. Miss one and we'll start all over again."

His eyes shine with dark sadism and strange satisfaction as I do as he says, partly because I don't mind this time.

Partly because I don't actually have a choice.

He retrieves his phone as he wipes a streak of cum from my chin with his fingers before thrusting them inside my mouth again, then whispers, "You can hide from the whole world, but you don't need to do so in front of me, baby."

Flash.

GLYNDON

It takes me a few moments to put my clothes together. My fingers tremble and my body temperature doesn't seem to get the memo that the fun times are over.

Killian has already tucked himself in, looking as flawless as the devil and just as hedonistic.

Seeming to notice my struggle, he subtly pushes my hand away and glides my bra over my breasts.

"I must say, I prefer undressing you."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Because you're starting to know me better."

"You say that as if it's a privilege."

"It's not?"

"No. I'm only learning about you to know how to deal with you."

"Smart little rabbit." He lets the straps snap against my shoulders, his voice lowering. "Fucking red."

My stomach tightens, instantly reacting to the change of his tone.

I stare at him from beneath my lashes as he continues putting my clothes together. But no matter how much I look, I can't really read his expression. He's the worst enigma to ever walk the earth, and I find myself wondering about what he's thinking at times like these.

He definitely isn't thinking about whatever emotional implications of his actions, considering he lacks emotions, and seems happy with the fact.

He owns that part of him, takes pride in it, and uses it to do depraved acts like the hunt tonight.

Like knocking out those people and tracking me as if I were an animal.

Would I ever feel like more than an animal in his presence? And what can I do to make him lose interest? If Eli and Lan are any indication, then his type has a short attention span for everything.

Unless we're talking about Eli when it comes to Ava.

Or Lan when it comes to sculpting.

But those obsessions started fairly young for both Eli and Lan. They basically grew with their personalities, so they can't be compared to Killian's sudden fixation on me.

He'll eventually get bored and move on to some other unfortunate soul.

He has to.

Or else I'm completely and utterly doomed.

"What are you thinking about?" His smooth voice swirls around me as he hooks his fingers against the edge of my top and tugs me against him. I'm starting to realize he likes to constantly touch me in some way.

"An effect Cecily once mentioned."

"And what is that?"

"Have you ever heard of the suspension bridge effect? It's when people experience psychological responses related to fear, but they mislabel them as romantic arousal. The actual term is called misattribution of arousal, I think."

His fingers stroke the skin of my stomach in a circular motion, and he hums, "Let me guess. Your busy little brain was thinking of that as a way out of actually wanting me?"

"I'm pretty sure I don't want you. I told you. My reaction to you is probably me misjudging fear and anxiety as arousal. Think about it. Every time you touched me, I was scared in some way."

The more I talk about it, the more it makes sense. There's no way I'd willingly want this bastard who lacks a human bone in his body.

"Aren't you the smart one?" He pulls on my top and I crash against his chest with a yelp. He lifts his other hand and tucks a

strand of hair behind my ear. The gesture seems to be doting but feels threatening. "So what if it is fear? The point is that you want me."

"It's not real. It's an illusion."

"If that makes you sleep better at night, let's say it is."

"I could want someone else if I feel scared in their presence or see them after being scared."

"Believe me, little rabbit, that won't be happening. Not unless you want some splashes of his blood on this flawless skin. Though I'm sure it'd look pretty, don't you think?"

I shudder, trying and failing to prevent that image from forming in my head. This wanker knows all the right buttons to push.

"You really don't care that I don't want you for you as a person?" I realize that I'm provoking him, and I don't know what's come over me. I just know that a weird sense of courage has grabbed hold of me today.

I'm no longer the scaredy-cat Glyn—that didn't get me anywhere—so I might as well embrace the change.

"You don't want me as a person, huh?"

"No. You're not my type."

He pauses before stroking my stomach again. "And what's your type?"

"Someone nice."

"I can be nice."

"Yeah, right."

His voice lowers to a shiver-inducing range. "I gave you time like you asked, and it was a stretch on my part since, and I repeat, I am not a giver. So if that's not considered nice, maybe I should retract my promise and be the opposite of nice."

"Don't..." This asshole is a major headache. I can never win against him.

"Does that mean I'm nice?"

"You can be," I mutter.

"Look at that. I'm suddenly your type." I glare up him and I'm met with a low chuckle. "You're so adorable, I could eat you up."

"I'm not edible."

"Judging by the taste of your sweet little cunt, you most definitely are."

Heat rises to my neck and ears and it takes everything in me to keep staring into his gleaming eyes. The bastard is enjoying this. Probably way too much.

"I'm surprised you haven't gotten yourself killed due to how infuriating you are." I huff.

He kisses the top of my head. "That's because I know how to fight."

"Can we go?" I start to step away from him and he surprisingly lets me go.

I quicken my steps down the path and he catches up to me, mask around his neck. He picks the bat up from the ground and swings it onto his shoulder.

My heart tightens when I make out the smudges of blood on the wood.

"Do you know if the people you hurt are okay?"

"They should be."

"Does that mean they could *not* be?"

"Probably."

"And...you're not going to do anything to make sure?"

"Why should I? Jeremy and Nikolai's guards will take care of it."

"You...really wouldn't care if you hurt someone fatally?"

"Again, why? They willingly signed up for this."

"What if it was me you sent flying with your bat?"

"I didn't."

"What if you had?"

He tilts his head to the side, a sudden dullness making his eyes muted. "Do you really want to know the answer to that?"

The thought of holding absolutely no meaning to him makes my blood turn cold, but at the same time, it's better if I don't, right? I'll just hate him more and I definitely need to deepen those feelings.

So I nod.

"I wouldn't have hit you in the first place, because I would have recognized you."

"What if you did accidentally? In the middle of your violence spree?"

"Using violence doesn't mean losing my head, so I still would've recognized you."

"What if one of your other friends had hit me?"

"I would've put my med student status to use and nursed you back to health. It might have turned kinky like some cheap porn's plot right afterward, though."

"Does everything has to revolve around sex with you?"

"Hmm. Good question." He tilts his head in my direction. "I think that's only the case when it comes to you."

"Because you want my virginity?"

"There's that, but it's not the sole reason."

"What is then?"

"You're not ready for it yet."

His tone suggests that he's done with this topic and will probably ignore any further questions.

But I need to keep him talking.

We're getting so close to the finish line and I still have a chance to win this.

"Are you not going to hunt anymore?" I ask.

"You distracted me. How are you going to take the responsibility for my losing?"

"I didn't ask you to leave everyone else and follow me."

"I couldn't just let a stray little rabbit roam free. Besides, the urge is gone."

"Urge?"

"The one I need to satiate with some form of stimuli. Usually, I'd be all in for the hunt, but today...you were surprisingly enough. Is that interesting or what?"

No, it's downright horrifying. I don't want to be his fixation or the catalyst to his madness.

I just don't.

My fingers shake and I rub a palm on the side of my shorts.

"What did I say about that habit?"

My movement comes to a halt and I let my hands fall to my sides. Night has fallen and the dark stakes its claim, casting a

nefarious energy over the forest. Under different circumstances, this would be a dreamy date.

With Killian, however, it feels like an episode of *Hannibal*. There's always a fifty percent chance he'll jump me and snuff out my life.

"Has anyone told you that you're a tyrant?"

"You're the first."

"Guess they don't see this side of you, then."

"This side?"

"The controlling, oppressive side."

"They do. It's just more subtle with them. I don't need to make that effort with you."

"Because I'm easy prey?"

"Because you're already acquainted with my type. It'd be a waste of resources and energy to try and fool you."

The meaning behind his words hits me. He doesn't have to hide in my presence.

I don't know if I should laugh or cry. Being special to a borderline psychopath is about the worst position I could be in.

Yet, my chest swells at the thought that he has no need to hide in front of me.

I can trust that I'll always see his uncut version. No matter how twisted or barren, it'll always be true.

Even when he had the neon red mask on, he remained out in the open, not once attempting to hide.

"Should I celebrate the fact that I'm the only one you don't feel the need to fool?"

"As long as your celebration ends with me between your legs, by all means."

"Bloody prick."

"Didn't I say your cursing turns me on? Might want to tone down that a little unless you're in the mood for round two of sucking my cock."

"Is there anything that doesn't turn you on?"

"You lying and coming up with psychological garbage to deny what we have definitely doesn't. In fact, it pisses me the fuck off."

A gust of wind causes the hairs on my nape to stand on end. This dark version of him makes me apprehensive to a point I've

never felt before.

And yes, I totally lied earlier. The dark, unhinged side of Killian terrifies the fuck out of me.

Still, I manage to say, "We don't have anything. We're not in a relationship."

He lifts a shoulder. "Whether it's a relationship or not means jack shit to me. That label holds no importance."

"Then what does?"

"The fact that you're mine."

"I'm n—" The word dies in my throat when he suddenly blocks my path, his eyes shining with venomous intent.

He slowly shakes his head. "Don't finish that word unless you're in the mood to anger me."

I swallow the drool that gathered in my mouth, but my chin remains high. "You can't force me to become yours."

"Watch me."

"I'll fight every step of the way."

"By all means. It'd make the end result sweeter."

"I hate you."

"Let me search for the fucks I have to give." He pretends to study his surroundings. "See? None."

I push past him and stomp for a while before I force myself to remain calm and walk normally.

Killian fucking Carson catches up to me—of course—and casually asks, "Why are you in a hurry? Shouldn't you enjoy our second date?"

"Second *what*?"

"Date. It could be considered the third, but I have a feeling you don't think of that first meeting on the cliff as a date."

"No shit."

"So that makes the firefly lake our first date and this one our second."

"A date happens in a restaurant or a fun place where I wouldn't feel on the edge every second."

"Aren't those the type of dates boring couples who have to fake orgasms for each other go to? Besides, you had fun both times. Don't attempt denying it."

"Oh yeah, being threatened all the time is *so* fun."

"I wouldn't have to if you weren't acting difficult, so maybe you're the one who's blocking yourself from having fun."

"I can't believe this. So it's my fault now?"

"I didn't say that." He grins. "You did."

The audacity of this bastard is seriously out of this world. Just when I'm thinking about the best insult to come up with, we reach a clearing. A vast piece of land covered by grass comes into view and in the distance sits a small building.

The security building that if we reach, we win.

Killian doesn't seem focused on that, and I suppress the feeling of desperation as we continue walking at a steady pace.

I'm pretty sure he can smell any change of emotions like some human dog. Just because he doesn't feel emotions like the rest of us doesn't mean he can't recognize them or even understand them.

If there's anything I've learned about Killian, it's the fact that he's a well-adjusted psychopath. He has immense impulse control, and is calculative to a fault.

There may have been a time in his past where he lost that control like Lan sometimes does, but they can both adapt so well to the circumstances and fuse themselves within society as if they belong.

And the more they live, the harder it is to reach inside their sturdy bubble. It's more impossible to make them lose control once they've mastered it.

Since they're constantly in control, they observe everything. Killian might seem detached, but he has hawk-like observational skills. Nothing escapes him.

So I try my best to remain nonchalant and tune out the sound of eliminated numbers being announced all around us.

"Who owns this place?" I ask, and do one heck of a job of sounding normal.

"We all do. It's a gift from campus because our parents donate a shitload of money to the institution."

"I assume the 'we' are you, Jeremy, Nikolai, and Gareth?"

"Correct."

"Who's the one behind the fifth mask?"

"No one you should concern yourself with."

"Do you always dance around the subject when you don't want to answer the question?"

"Maybe."

"That's not fair."

"Life isn't fair, why should I be?"

I steal a peek at the building in front of us. Two meters. No, probably one and a half.

Killian stops, but I pretend not to notice and continue ahead. Yes, the members of the group are monstrous, judging by what I witnessed today, but I'm done being scared and hiding.

If I'm in their inner circle, I'll be able to figure out what happened to Devlin and—

Something touches my shoulder and I freeze as the speaker echoes around us, "Number sixty-nine eliminated."

I swing back to stare at Killian, who just tapped me with his bat.

"You think I haven't figured out what you're up to, little rabbit?"

"Why...you...you..."

"Deep breaths." The amusement in his voice pisses me the hell off. "That's it. We don't want you to somehow have a stroke when you're this young."

"Why have you waited until now to eliminate me?"

He lifts a shoulder. "It was fun watching you trying to distract me and acting like an amateur in a B-class spy movie. You should look at your adorable face." He retrieves his phone from his pocket and snaps a picture. "Now, I'll keep this expression with me forever."

"I'm going to kill you."

"I'll kiss you in the meantime."

I'm about to grab his stupid bat and lunge it at his head when the door of the security house opens behind me.

"Killer!"

Wait, what? A *killer*?

It takes me a second to realize that the feminine voice was directing that nickname at Killian.

A tall, slim figure steps out, wearing white mask number one. Straight blonde hair falls to her bare shoulders and she's wearing

a skin-tight strapless top that accentuates her hourglass waist.

She pulls the mask away from her face and I freeze at how stunning she is. Like a model or an actress or both.

And when she smiles, it's so blinding that I have trouble looking directly at her.

She subtly pushes me away and throws herself at Killian, wrapping her arms around his neck with the ease of someone who's done this countless times.

"I missed you," she murmurs, and then her lips meet his.

GLYNDON

I stare at the scene, dumbfounded.

You know that moment when you freeze up and have no idea whether moving or even breathing is okay?

Actually, screw it.

The prominent emotion that tears through my chest isn't feeling like a third wheel or being slammed in the face by PDA—it's something worse.

A burst of energy slashes through my veins so similar to...rage.

I swear I'm not the jealous type.

In secondary school, I found my boyfriend making out with my classmate and just closed the door and broke up with him via text.

I don't feel any resentment toward Bran for being Mum's favorite, for being the vessel of her talent. Nor for the fact that she goes the extra mile in her attempts to protect him from Lan.

I also have no resentment toward Lan for getting all the attention in our family. Or toward Ava for looking like a goddess and being perfect at everything she does. Or Cecily for being the most balanced human I know.

In short, I don't feel jealous.

So why the hell do I feel the need to dig myself a hole in the ground and disappear in it?

It's not jealousy. I refuse to categorize it as such. Because if I'm jealous, it means I care, and that's not close to possible.

I even came up with the proper explanation for it with that suspension bridge effect theory.

That one makes sense. This whole situation doesn't.

The leggy blonde all but thrusts her tongue against Killian's lips. I know because I can see it being stopped by said lips—closed lips, thinned-into-a-line lips.

If it were me, clearly rejected like that, I would dig that hole deeper and vanish farther in it. Maybe bury myself alive while I'm at it, too. However, the blonde doesn't stop and even goes on to bite his lower lip.

Instead of asking for a kiss—she's demanding it.

Unable to keep looking, I stare at the ground, my eyes blurry and my ears so hot, I think they'll explode. Is there an exit somewhere? Maybe it's on the other end of the house?

In my peripheral vision, I make out Killian's hand shooting out, grabbing the girl by the hair, and wrenching her away from him. Then he steps back, letting his hand fall to his side.

I guess that means he's not savage with only me.

I expect her to whine or yelp—I would've definitely shrieked from how painful it looked—but she just licks her lips, showing a piercing in her tongue. "I love it when you're being rough. *Rawr.*"

Is she crazy? Why the hell would she like the bastard's violence?

Oh, wait.

Aren't there people who get off on it? Like Killian, for instance.

I lift my head to watch them openly, not bothering to hide the fact.

"What are you doing here, Cherry?"

Of course her name is Cherry. She looks like a Cherry.

A seductive grin curves her lips. "I always wondered about your secret club, so I thought I should join. Look. I won."

My heart sinks at the reminder that I didn't win, and the bastard eliminated me at the last second. This Cherry, however, is already a member.

Killian's expression remains blank, so she steps toward him, swaying her hips and biting the corner of her lower lip. "How about a celebratory fuck to welcome me to the Heathens? You can choke me."

I step backward as if I've been slapped. I can't stay here anymore. My chest aches at the thought that he's done the things

he did to me to someone else.

He choked them, too.

He probably ambushed them and made them feel alive just to drop them when he got bored.

I know all of that, I do, so why the hell do I feel like crying?

One thing's for certain, I definitely won't stay to watch them hook up.

"I'm...going to go." My whisper is barely audible.

Refusing to lower my head, I turn around and start to walk from where I came.

Though maybe I can go into the house and see if there's a way out—

A strong hand wraps around my elbow, jerking me to a halt. I stare up at Killian who all but fuses me to his side.

"I have someone else for a celebratory fuck. Better luck next time, Cherry."

I want to say no, there'll be no fucking and absolutely nothing to celebrate, but for some reason, I remain silent.

It's due to the change in Cherry's face from proper flirtatious to frightening calculation. "And who is this lost lamb?"

"More like a little rabbit. She runs fast." Instead of mockery, there's a hint of...pride in his tone. But before I can comment on that, he slides his palm from my elbow so he can wrap it around my waist. Possessively. "The door is to your left, and so are the dicks you can suck."

"You're still mad about that? We weren't exclusive, Killer."

"I'd have to care to be mad."

Cherry waltzes in our direction until she's glued to Killian's other side. "Do you honestly think you'll be able to replace me with this...boring lamb? She's looks as ordinary as a grandma from fairy tales and doesn't have what it takes to keep your mind and body stimulated. She'll never understand you like I do, give you the thrill that I do. So don't waste your precious time on some neurotypical human who's not worthy of your attention. And you"—she directs her malicious glare at me—"stop running after him. You're not on his level."

"Who told you I'm the one running after him?" I'm surprised my voice remains calm. "In fact, he's the one bugging me, even

though I've told him countless times to leave me alone." I dig my elbow into his side and try to pull away from him. "Now, if you'll excuse me, this neurotypical human is leaving."

Hot breaths tickle my ear and send shivers through my body. I stiffen as Killian whispers, "If you leave, I'll fuck her."

"I don't care! You can go to hell and it would mean shit to me," I all but yell, then with superhuman strength—that's probably a result of the adrenaline—I push him away and storm in the direction of the house.

My fingers twitch and I rub my hand against my shorts as I barge into the hall.

I pause when I find two of the neon purge masks inside.

Green Mask stands by the corner, watching the scene outside, apparently. The yellow mask, however, sits on a sofa with a participant on his lap.

No kidding. The one with the number eighty-nine is using Yellow Mask as a chair.

Judging by his form, he's most definitely a man and...he looks a bit familiar. I try to meet his eyes, but he lowers his head, remaining still.

Yellow Mask—who's been watching him the whole time—jerks his attention to me. I swallow a scream at the sight of blood on his mask and his hands that he's using to grab eighty-nine's waist.

"Lost?"

I startle at the sound coming from behind me and stare back to find Green Mask staring down at me.

"Uh, yeah. Can you tell me where the exit is?"

"Follow me."

He walks in front and I hesitate for a beat, but at the yellow mask's glare, I slowly follow the green one.

The Heathens are a complete freak show and no one will be able to convince me otherwise. A shiver slashes through me at the thought of what they might do in the dark.

As I leave the hall, I can't help feeling bad for eighty-nine. He'll be okay, right?

Maybe that's what Devlin felt at the hands of these guys before he decided to drive straight off that cliff.

He's not antagonistic, and if they made him indulge in violence or mind games, it might have shattered him.

"You're not supposed to be here."

I jerk out of my thoughts to focus on Green Mask who's leading me down a barely lit hallway with gothic-like red wallpaper.

For some reason, I'm waiting for a creepy hand to shoot out and drag me into one of the rooms, horror film style.

Green Mask is tall but lean, and he has a calming presence, definitely not threatening like the yellow one.

"Why not?" I ask.

"You were eliminated and this place is exclusive to members."

Eighty-nine is a member? It can't be. The yellow mask looked like he could've easily eliminated him.

"I didn't know that and I just want to leave now," I say, hoping he'll drop it.

I'm trying, and probably failing, to not think about the scene I left behind.

Green Mask stops near a closet, opens it, then looks at my wrist. I remain still as he rummages through it, then produces my phone. It's wrapped in a plastic bag with the number '69' on it.

"Thanks," I murmur, tucking it in my pocket.

Green Mask only nods, then continues his silent march. We arrive at the double doors that lead to a patio with stairs. A short distance away sits a black gate—smaller than the front one, probably a back entrance.

He stops in front of me and slowly removes his mask, letting it fall around his neck.

The man behind it is none other than Gareth.

As in, Killian's older brother Gareth.

Where Killian has dark hair, expression, and everything, Gareth is more blond, with light green eyes and a less sharp presence.

There are still a few traits that makes him look like Killian's sibling. Only, he seems more trustworthy—probably due to his calm appearance.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"You should stay away from Kill. He's bad news."

"So everyone keeps telling me, but he's the one who won't leave me alone."

His expression softens and he releases a long sigh. "Then my condolences."

"Why?"

"Because he doesn't stop until he gets what he wants, and what he wants isn't often known."

"He won't be able to come near me now that he has someone else." I throw my hands up in a vague gesture. "Like that Cherry."

He's going to fuck her, as he promised, and I'm never allowing him near me again.

Not even if I have to suffer for it.

Not even if I have to unleash Lan on him.

Actually, both Lan and Eli, and Creighton if I'm in the mood. I didn't want to get them involved before, because I was genuinely scared to cause them trouble, but I'll go against my nature and ask for their help this time.

Gareth unhooks the mask from around his neck and strokes the creepy neon smile. "I wouldn't be so sure if I were you. I've known Kill all my life and I still can't figure out what the hell he's thinking about most of the time."

My interest perks up. "How...do you deal with him? If you don't mind me asking, of course."

A sad smile pulls his lips, resembling the shades of autumn. That's what fits him—a mixture of warm, dying colors. "My way of dealing with him is nowhere near impressive. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"Yes, please."

"I just avoid being the subject of his entertainment."

"Are you scared of him?"

"No, but I'm scared of his lack of empathy. I'm also scared he'll end up hurting our parents in an irrevocable way, which is why I try to monitor him as much as possible—while staying out of his way."

"You mean like a big brother?"

"No, like a lawyer." He releases a sigh. "He's a criminal in the making, and just because our parents refuse to see that doesn't mean I don't. Killian started by killing mice, then scaled up to

hurting his classmates, then me. Then he got himself in mafia business just so he could witness the brutality firsthand. Not to mention these initiations that he keeps escalating in intensity with each season. At some point, all these stimulants won't be enough for his mind and he'll end up killing. It's a matter of when, not if. And when that happens, he won't be able to get enough of the taste of finishing a life. He'll keep doing it again and again, just to experience that intoxicating thrill, until he'll eventually get caught. So I'm just waiting for him to fall into that hole."

I frown. "That's not true."

"What isn't?"

"The fact that he'll surely become a criminal. He has more control than anyone I know."

"Or that's what he wants everyone to think. Kill is not completely in control—he's merely suppressing his true desires, and one day, they'll rule him."

No.

Gareth is only seeing him in a dark light, probably because of their history. There's more to Killian than his violent intent.

And no, I'm not defending him. I'm just thinking of it as I would about Lan.

Though my brother is a bit different. I *think*. He loves our parents and us. Or maybe he fakes it so well that we're blinded to it.

"You be careful out there." Gareth points at the door.

And I take that as my cue to go.

Once I'm outside, I can't help stealing a look behind me. Gareth has both hands in his pockets as he watches me with a blank expression that somehow makes me uneasy.

I leave with images of Cherry and Killian assaulting my head. Even as I make myself think that I absolutely do not care.

I don't.

Right?

MAYBE I DO CARE A LITTLE.

Or a lot.

Considering I haven't been able to sleep.

After I sneak into the flat, I think I hear moans of pain. But after close inspection, it's only Ava's cello. Cecily's light is out, so she must be asleep.

Me? I toss and turn in bed for half an hour, picturing Killian on top of that blonde. In my imagination, he's thrusting inside her and roughening her up as she likes it and—

I stuff my face with a pillow in an attempt to shoo the image away.

Then I roll onto my back and open my Instagram app. The first image that comes up is a selfie of Annika, pouting while leaning on one hand as the sun glows from the tall French doors behind her.

There's beautiful and then there's photogenic beauty like Anni's.

She captioned her picture *'Bored. Tell me something about yourself.'*

The first comment that appears is from lord-remington-astor.

My lack of knowledge on Greek literature has always been my Achilles' elbow.

Annika answers with a line of laughing-out-loud emojis. Then she and Remi keep talking back and forth for like twenty comments in the midst of which they tag Creigh five times, but he doesn't honor them with a response.

Wait. Did these two actually make an Instagram account for Creighton?

I scroll down to find another comment from a familiar name.

nikolai_sokolov: *Might want to delete this before Jeremy does his night patrol.*

I click on his profile and find that he has tens of thousands of followers. No kidding.

Nikolai's profile has a whole dark grungy mood. It's full of smoky pictures, fighting pictures, and among them are weird family ones that don't fit. In one, he's surrounded by two stunning identical blondes who are laughing at the camera as he frowns.

Still trying to deceive me, but I know the one on the left is Maya... Right?

There's a screenshot from what looks to be a group chat with an interesting caption.

Surrounded by idiots.

Gareth: Group study?

Nikolai: I have a better idea. Group sex.

Gareth: Gross.

Jeremy: Try again in a hundred years.

Killian: I'm blocking you.

I can almost hear Killian's monotone voice as he says that, and my stomach flips, but I exit the screenshot and continue scrolling through Nikolai's account.

In the last picture he posted, Nikolai is grabbing a struggling Gareth and a bored-looking Killian in chokeholds.

Stuck with these motherfuckers for life. Not that I'm complaining...okay, maybe a little.

I tap on the tag section, my finger trembling as I click on **killian.carson**.

My heart nearly leaps out of my throat when I find the Follow Back button.

Just when the hell did he follow me?

Though he did mention that he saw my *Inception*-inspired painting and my stories earlier.

I run back to my notifications and find he liked a lot of my pictures. I scroll down and down, and holy hell, the crazy bastard liked all five hundred pictures I posted on Instagram.

Every single one.

An hour ago.

Isn't that around the time I came back to the flat? Does that mean he didn't continue his plan or am I just looking for excuses?

I return to his profile.

If I expected him to have about the same following as Nikolai, I'm terribly mistaken—it's way more. Like two hundred thousand more.

Of course the prick is popular. No surprise there.

His profile's description is: *Med student. Lover of fine things.*

Killian's account is less chaotic than Nikolai's. In fact, it's aesthetically pleasing with warm colors and a lot of positive energy. Parties. Med students' gatherings. Friends. Family. People.

Lots and lots of people and faces and smiles and life.

It's the perfect façade for his rotten insides.

He's either smiling or laughing or smirking in pictures. Some are taken in exotic places, others are on filthy-rich properties. Not only does his family have money, but he likes to show it, too.

The more I scroll, the surer I am that Killian is the male version of the social butterfly that's taken over Ava and Annika, but without their sincerity.

Killian is flat out mimicking the youth's obsession with social media and he's doing it way better than they do since charisma comes naturally to him.

But I know that each of his smiles is undeniably fake.

As I go through his profile, I can tell why people would be so attracted to him. There are a lot of beautiful men around, but there are only a handful with his level of easygoing attractiveness. He doesn't have to try to attract people's attention like a magnet.

They flock to him like a moth to a flame without knowing they'll burn if they get too close.

Or if he sets his sights on them.

I click on a family picture in which an elegantly dressed woman, whom I assume is his mother, sits on a high-back baroque chair. Her expression is of a badass queen as she holds the hand of a man that rests on her shoulder. Her husband—considering his resemblance to both Gareth and Killian—stands right behind her wearing a smirk. Both Gareth's and Killian's faces, however, are full of horror.

I scroll sideways for another picture in which she's laughing, her husband's expression is solemn, and Gareth appears relieved. Killian is throwing his head back in laughter.

Unlike the other picture, this laugh doesn't seem completely fake. It's not genuine either—just right in the middle.

My attention slides to the caption.

The difference between 'Maybe I'll give you boys a little sister, after all' and 'Just kidding, look at your faces.'

I notice a pattern where Killian posts more family pictures with his mother and his aunt, his mum's identical twin, who's also Nikolai's mother, than with his father or Gareth.

In fact, the only time he posts a picture of his father is when his mother is around.

And there's only one time where he's posted a picture of Gareth, who's out for a run in the rain.

My big bro's leg day might turn into swim day in this weather. Get it together, England.

However, there are tons of pictures of his mother. In the last one, he has a selfie of her trying to feed him a biscuit while he scrunches his face.

I told my favorite woman that I stopped being six more than a decade ago, and she said "Not on my watch" as she stuffed me with a cookie. Thoughts on convincing your mom you've grown up?

Then he has another picture where he's standing between his mother and aunt. His mum pinches his jaw while laughing and his aunt grins.

Guess who's the queens' escort for the night? Be mad @nikolai_sokolov.

My eyes blur with all the similar images. The normal, hyper, absolutely mesmerizing documentation of his life.

Oh, he's good.

He's so good at blending in that even I am starting to wonder if it's all real.

I go back up to the last picture he posted about five hours ago of the five neon purge masks.

Night of mischief.

I scroll up and I freeze as the profile refreshes. During my snooping, he posted another picture.

It's black and white, showing his middle and ring finger inside a mouth.

My mouth.

This is the picture he took earlier when I was underneath him as he told me I can hide from the whole world but not him.

Nothing is visible aside from my neck and my lips, but I know it's me.

Damn him.

God damn him.

My fingers shake as I scroll to the caption.

Caught a little rabbit tonight and I decided to keep it.

Keep it, my butt.

I'm fuming, and all the 'that's hot' and 'holy fuck' comments aren't helping. So I close the app and throw the phone on my bed.

Then I think better of it. How dare the bastard post that picture of me after the whole show with Cherry?

He wants to play?

I will play.

It takes me five minutes to find the sketch I was playing with at lunch earlier. I place it beside the blank canvas and pick up my warm colors.

I only have a vague idea of where I'm taking this, but stroke after stroke, the image comes into focus.

For the first time, I'm thankful I don't have a problem painting humans, and I do so with flying colors.

My creation stares back at me with a soft expression. It's an imaginary man who, unlike Killian, has blond hair, hazel eyes, and a dimpled smile. There's a softness in his gaze and he looks so nice that I get a huge grin.

After adjusting the lights, I take a picture of the painting and post it on IG with the caption 'My type.'

Annika is the first one to comment.

annika-volkov: *SO cute *heart eyes emoji**

the-ava-nash: *Bitch, what? I mean WHAT? Where's this fine specimen and why haven't we interrogated him yet?*

cecily-knight: *What Ava said.*

ariella-jailbait-nash: *Go, girl.*

lord-remington-astor: *No, no, go back? I reserve veto rights on this cunt who looks untrustworthy as fuck.*

Cecily and Ava gang up on him. Ariella defends him, and Annika keeps fawning and creates a separate thread for her and Ava's socializing column.

I smile, pleased with myself. Mission accomplished.

As soon as I sit down, my phone vibrates.

I startle as the message across the screen reads:

Psycho: Like fuck he is.

KILLIAN

I kick some boy Nikolai brought over out of my path.

Actually, make that two boys *and* a random girl.

My cousin usually has more women than men around, but he's been acting strange since the initiation last night.

The boys are hammered, probably high, and don't even whine as I push them with my foot.

Nikolai, however, isn't between them, gracing us with a porn show first thing in the morning. Exhibitionism is the foundation of his soul, and while voyeurism isn't something I'm against, it's annoying when they all start shouting and irritating my sensitive ears with their noise.

After the initiation was over, White left without bothering to see who got in. No surprise there since he only cares about the game part, not the administrative part—same.

Gareth and Jeremy stuck around to welcome our two new members. The first is Cherry. I have a feeling she's the one my idiot brother escorted into the compound and followed her around like he's her puppy.

The second is an REU preppy posh elite. We invited exactly five—aside from Glyndon's unexpected invitation. We don't let REU kids in our ranks, but we made an exception this time for a scheme Jeremy and I have been plotting.

All five declined the invitation by not showing up. We expected as much, considering their close relationship with the Elites. The participant who got accepted isn't one of them; it's someone Nikolai personally sent an invitation then ambushed and held in a

chokehold back in the forest. The one I was sure he'd murder for his insolence, but whose number was never said by the announcer. Since Nikolai only used his fists, he would've had to update the back base himself about any of the ones he eliminated.

Apparently, he didn't do that for eighty-nine and even escorted him back to our compound to announce he was a new member. Something that Jeremy frowned upon, so he warned Nikolai and the guards to keep an eye on in case he was a spy, then moved on to antagonizing him.

Eighty-nine left soon after that shitshow—despite Nikolai's attempts to keep him here for the celebration.

Cherry, however, brazenly shoved herself in one of the bedrooms for the night—probably Gareth's. She tried to get in my room, but I kicked her out since I was busy looking at my phone for hours on end, waiting for a reply from the little rabbit.

None came.

I have no doubt that she saw my post on Instagram and decided to come up with her dull 'My type' painting. Since then, I've been considering creating a thousand Instagram accounts just so I can report it and have it taken down.

She really has no idea what she's dealing with, huh?

For the rest of the night, I sat in the control room watching security footage. I saw every move my little rabbit made from where she appeared at the mansion like a scaredy-cat to how she slowly gained courage.

There was no footage of when I ravaged her for dinner since I made sure to take her where there are no cameras. If any of the guards had seen her naked or witnessed her erotic face, they'd be conducting a rant meeting with their maker as we speak.

Am I too possessive? Yes. Even I recognize that, due to the fact that I didn't give a fuck about my sexual partners before.

But I realized something.

It's not only about sex with Glyndon. I have a feeling that I'll still feel the need to own her long after she spreads her legs.

During my observational session, I checked that her invitation to the Heathens' initiation was indeed sent from our servers.

No trace of hacking or underhanded methods.

Jeremy couldn't care less about these details and leaves them to his security. Nikolai is more detached, unless there's a fighter he wants to challenge.

The most likely culprit is none other than my brother. Who escorted Glyndon out like some fucking knight.

If I confront him about it, he'll just deny it. So I'll search for proof and hit him upside the head with it. Logically, he has no reason to get her involved—except to antagonize me.

The thing is, Gareth is a good boy and dislikes using people.

Then, there's the whole arrow incident that I still can't find an explanation for. Whoever tried to shoot me did it from an impossible angle where they couldn't be caught on camera.

It's someone who's well aware of the workings of our internal systems.

Someone...close.

After a whole night of watching footage and obsessing over my phone like a teenager, I finally came down the stairs.

Once I kick away Nikolai's fuck buddies, I continue on my way. I step on something black—someone—pause, then poke at it with my foot. Did a murder happen while I was sleeping—or trying to?

What type of blasphemy is that? I demand a redo.

I nudge the figure for a good minute before he rolls to his back with a groan, revealing none other than my deranged cousin.

His hands are still covered with dry blood—that will be a bitch to remove—and his face is stuck in a frown, like a whore dreaming about a boring fuck.

I kick him again. "There are beds around, you know."

"Fuck off, you motherfucking fuck," he mumbles, but he doesn't sound sleepy, more like thoughtful. "Did I bother you sleeping on my own damn floor? Let me think in peace."

I nudge him again, just to fuck with him. "Since when do you use the word think? Have you hit your head somewhere? Let me take you to the hospital for a quick scan, maybe see if you actually have a brain while we're at it."

He groans loudly and sits up with the lethargy of an immortal monster. He opens his bloodshot eyes that are surrounded by dark circles. Someone had a night. "Fuck off before I murder you

and hug Aunt Reina at your funeral while she cries over her useless son."

"What got your panties in a twist, Niko? Bad fuck night?"

"More like an absence of fucks night."

"Really?" I tilt my head in the three passed-out druggies' direction. "You literally have infinite options. What's wrong? Erectile dysfunction?"

He snarls at me.

"Fuck. It is?"

"Fuck off, Satan's heir. It's called lack of interest."

"It's called impotence. Our poor Niko. Should I get you some blue pills? Don't worry, it'll be our little secret."

Nikolai surges up and slides down his pants and boxers, revealing his very hard, very pierced dick. "Told you it's lack of fucking interest. Now, fuck the fuck off before I stab you with it."

"Highly not recommended, you'll just break your stick of joy." I throw a bored glance at his companions for the night. "None of them would do?"

He pulls up his pants, then taps the back of his pocket, retrieves a crumpled-up cigarette, and speaks around it as he tries to light it, but his Zippo won't work. "They're as enticing as STD-infested whores. None of them know how suck dick right."

I pull my Zippo and light his cigarette, then get one of my own. "Then go to someone who does."

He pauses with his cigarette dangling, then wraps an arm around my shoulder, virtually squeezing the fuck out of me. "You're a motherfucking genius, Kill."

"And you're just figuring that out?"

He continues the mission of being a clingy fuck. "You're right, I should just change scenery. Care for some shooting lessons? That instructor is good at getting on her knees."

"Can't. Busy." I slip out of his octopus hold, then swiftly shove him away.

"Boo. I'll go with my fave cousin, Gaz. You can kindly fuck off."

I flip him off on my way out, then instead of lighting my cigarette, I throw it away.

Something tastes off about it.

After attending my first class, I take a mock test that my colleagues basically flip their shit about. With their dark circles and tiresome dramatics, one would think they're not fit to be the elite of the elite.

If these bitches can't calm themselves over some test, how are they supposed not to break down in the middle of the ER or a surgery?

So what if I didn't study for the test myself? My genius neurons took care of half of it and the professor helped me with the other half when I went all charming on her.

Smarter not stronger. Or, God forbid, emotional.

What's so great about emotions anyway? All my life, I've only seen them cause more harm than good. If people toned down on that poison a little, they wouldn't need the drugs to battle it.

Once first period ends, I check my phone and ignore the countless meaningless notifications except for one.

Mom: Morning, baby boy! I hope you're having a great day. Mom loves you to Neptune and back.

I snicker. I think Mom just refuses to believe we've grown up anymore.

When we were little, people told their kids they loved them to the moon and back, but Mom picked the most distant planet in the solar system and told us that's how much she loves us.

I scribble a few things on my draft sheet that I usually don't use, but pretend I do for Mom's sake. At least that way, she'll think her son is normal and struggles with shit.

It's not one hundred percent effective, but it definitely helps in diluting her interest.

Then I take a picture and send it over.

Killian: Had a test this morning. Think I'll do well?

Mom: I know you will. Even if the world stops believing in you, I won't.

I tilt my head to the side, reading and re-reading her message. I guess she's obliged by nature to love me unconditionally, even if a part of her will always be scared of me.

At least she tries, and I respect that about her.

I also respect Dad's needs to establish clear boundaries. I would've probably done the same if I were him.

The only difference is, I don't want to be in the same room with him.

Not after that day.

"We should've only had Gareth." I heard him tell Mom when I punched one of my classmates because he was bullying my cousin.

Mom cried her eyes out. "Ash! If you love me, don't ever say anything like that again. Killian is our son, too."

"A defective one."

That's what I was. The defective one.

I didn't hear what Mom said after that, because Dad's words made sense. I'm the defective one compared to Gareth, and even Nikolai.

Still the most superior, just saying.

I check my other notifications but find no answer from the bothersome fucking little rabbit.

Switching to her tags, I find a picture Annika posted first thing this morning, probably after Jeremy escorted her back to REU.

It's a selfie taken in their apartment. Ava is leaning on a huge cello that nearly swallows her, making peace signs and slightly closing her eyes while grinning.

Annika practically mirrors her. And a girl with silver hair is half hiding behind Ava and letting her hair camouflage the other side. Only her body and the books she's hugging to her chest are visible from this angle.

My attention slides to Glyndon, who was caught while swinging her backpack over her shoulder and smiling awkwardly. She's the most non-spontaneous, terribly unsociable person I know.

But she's so real, it fucking pisses me off.

She's obviously alive and voluntarily chose to ignore my text.

annika-volkov: *Different majors. One heart. Love these girls to pieces xxx*

I pause when I find another tag for Glyndon that was posted fifteen minutes ago. This time, she's completely oblivious to the picture being taken since Remington is showing half of his pouting face while she and Creighton are in the background with books on their laps.

Her brow is furrowed in concentration as if her surroundings don't exist.

lord-remington-astor: *In my defense, when I said maybe we should study, I was half-conscious and totally didn't mean it. Now, I'm stuck with these nerds. Send help.*

I tap my finger against the back of my phone once, then ditch second period altogether and drive to the other campus.

It takes me some time to reach the art school since REU practically threw it all the way to the back.

When I arrive, Creighton and Remington are nowhere to be found. Instead, a boy with blond hair and shiny brown eyes sits with Glyndon on the edge of the fountain.

He even has his hair styled as if he's at some formal event. Oh, and he's wearing a cardigan sweater and khaki pants.

Fucking gag.

Though that plan is put to an abrupt halt when I catch glimpse of her laughing. Not smiling, not pretending to be nice as the King she was brought up to be, but flat out laughing.

What are the chances of drowning that boy in the fountain without anyone noticing? Probably zero since it takes someone a long time to die by drowning. The gurgling, struggling, and slow fucking death may be worth being locked up for, though.

Choices. Choices.

The sight of her being all radiant while wearing her usual top, shorts, and denim jacket triggers an uneasy feeling.

Could be the need for destruction—preferably of his face—or a queasiness I'm not used to.

Could be both.

I stalk in their direction, as slowly as possible, then sit beside Glyndon and wrap an arm around her shoulder. By the time she notices me, it's too late.

Now that she's in my clutches, there's nothing in this world that would make me let her go.

Except for when I get bored.

And that's simply not in the immediate plans.

Her lips part, pink today, like a shade of her favorite raspberry perfume. A blonde strand escapes the rest of her hair and I tuck it

behind her ear slowly, letting my fingers linger on her translucent skin.

My cock hardens when a red hue covers her cheeks.

Fuck.

I knew red was my favorite color.

"What...what are you doing here?" Now, this is a voice I could listen to all day long. Sweet, low, definitely not on the infuriating spectrum by any means.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I came to see you, baby. Aren't you going to introduce me to your company?"

The fire that eats up her eyes, obviously no longer shocked, hardens my dick further.

Maybe she's right and everything she does is able to stroke my libido.

Glyndon elbows me and I let her, taking the hit and pretending to wince.

"No," she whispers.

"You know that word has no meaning to me," I whisper back, then stare at the preppy-not-her-type guy. Jeremy and Nikolai say I have the most frightening 'back the fuck off' face and I make full use of it as I make my voice lower. "Killian Carson, Glyndon's boyfriend. You?"

"You're not—" It's my turn to tighten my hold on her shoulder, making her wince and shut up.

Preppy-totally-not-her-type guy clears his throat, his expression faltering. "Stuart. Glyn and I go to school together."

Stuart. Pfft. Of course his name is fucking *Stuart*.

It's with effort that I suppress laughter. "Nice to meet you, Stuart, that's such a lovely name. How are your parents?"

"Uh, good. I think?"

"Might want to check on them. I wouldn't trust the safety of people with such naming skills."

This time, Glyndon elbows me hard enough to make me grunt and smiles at him. "Never mind Killian. He has a twisted sense of humor."

"Okay, Glyn."

"Glyndon." My humor disappears. "That's her name."

"Uh, right." Stuart-still-not-her-type absentmindedly reaches for his messenger bag and stands up. "I'm...uh, I have to do an assignment. I'll see you around, Glyn...don."

Fucker escapes as if his ass is on fire and I continue watching him until he disappears into the building while simultaneously thinking of effective ways to stop him from breathing near her anymore.

Glyndon tries and promptly fails to free herself from me, which causes her to huff, and even the sound is adorable.

What the hell makes her that?

The mystery is starting to piss me the fuck off.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Why did you scare Stuart away? He's a bit delicate."

I chuckle and shake my head. "Of course he's delicate. I'd be surprised he's anything but a dainty flower with that type of name. There should be a petition to lock his parents up for it."

"You're a damn prick. Leave me alone."

"Didn't you hear? We're boyfriend and girlfriend now. I can't just leave you alone."

"I don't want to be your girlfriend. In fact, I don't want to be your anything."

"Good thing you have no say in it. Also, you left me on Read."

"Wasn't in the mood to talk to you while you were fucking your girlfriend."

"Look at you being adorably jealous. Were you upset that I tore through her cunt with my cock? Did you imagine me eating her pussy and making her choke on my cum like I did to you? Did it hurt?"

She whips her head in my direction, her lips thinned in a line. "Screw you."

"No, you actually told me to go screw Cherry." I retrieve my phone and scroll to my contacts. "She's usually one call away. If she comes, will you stay and watch this time or run away like a scared little rabbit again?"

She pushes me away, harder this time, and even though she uses all her strength, I still pin her in place, my voice losing all nonchalance. "Sit the fuck down. We're not done."

Her face twists and a tear clings to her lid. "You already have a fucktoy, why don't you leave me alone?"

"Cherry isn't my fucktoy, *you* are. If you play difficult again and say you don't care if I fuck her, I'll stuff her with my cock while you watch, then I'll revoke my nice phase and deflower you on the spot. I'm not a patient person, Glyndon, but I've been trying to conjure that trait for you. If you show no appreciation for my efforts, I'll just let my devil side take over."

Her lips part, some of the fight dispersing. "You...didn't sleep with her?"

"No. Do you want me to?"

She stares at the side, the ground. Anywhere but at me. However, I can see her throat bobbing up and down with a swallow.

I use my hand on her shoulder to switch her attention back to me. "Answer the question. Should I call Cherry?"

"No." Her voice is barely a whisper, eaten up by the commotion around us, but I hear it.

This is the first time she freed herself of moral shackles and let go.

Is it too early to fuck her on the edge of this same fountain and then think of a swift way to get rid of witnesses?

No.

Repress.

I don't want to scare her away when she's finally speaking the truth.

"What did you just say?" I play dumb. "I didn't hear."

She stares at me, more assertively this time. "I don't want you to fuck Cherry."

"Are you possessive of me, baby?"

"No. It's for myself. If you won't leave me alone, I refuse to be your or anyone else's side piece."

"If you say so."

"I mean it."

"Yeah, sure."

"If you touch any other woman, I'll go find my type."

"The Stuart variety? I'm sure your family would hire someone to kill him before adding that name to their repertoire. Maybe I

can do them the favor."

She huffs, eyes dripping with pure mischief. "That's where you're mistaken. My family always wanted me to end up with the Prince Charming type. Pretty sure they'd approve of Stuart."

My jaw clenches. "Not if he somehow ends up disfigured."

"Do you have to use violence for everything?"

"Not everything, no. Just whatever stands in my way." I stroke her cheek. "Don't be that, baby. All right?"

"I'm not scared of you."

I let my lips stretch into a smirk as I see myself in her bright, determined eyes. It's the only time I've looked forward to looking in a mirror. "That's what I like about you, my little rabbit."

Her lips fall open in an *O* and then she closes them and reaches for her bag to retrieve a sandwich.

I snatch it out of her hand and push it to the side.

"Give it back," she grumbles. "I'm hungry."

"And this is junk."

"Better than starving."

"I knew you had trouble taking care of your physical needs. I bet you're the type who stays up all night doing some passion project, sleeps two hours, then goes to class with dark circles."

"How...the hell do you know that?" She narrows her eyes. "Are you psychic?"

"When it comes to you? Always." I reach into my backpack and fetch the container I prepared early this morning and place it on her lap.

She looks at it expectantly. "Will I find a dead rat in this?"

"Shh. It's supposed to be a surprise."

"You're not funny."

"So you keep telling me, but I promise it's not my intent to be. Now, open it."

Her eyes turn to slits, but she slowly opens the container and pauses. I took extra care in making rice, shrimp, two types of salad and some eggs.

"Wow." Her lips part. "You...made this?"

"Yeah. Look, I even did a smiley face with the vegetables on the rice."

Her shoulders shake with laughter. "That's a very creepy smile and looks more horror-esque."

"At least I tried." I pass her the utensils. "Now, eat."

She takes a bite of the rice, doing her best not to ruin the smiley face, then she goes for the salad and the shrimp.

"This is so good. I didn't have any homemade meals since my last visit home."

"That's because you're shit at keeping up with your bodily needs."

"Hey, you don't have to be a dick about it." She swallows a spoonful of rice. "Besides, you must've tortured your cook to make you this."

"No, I actually did it myself."

She chokes and I retrieve a bottle of water, uncap it, and give it to her. I pat her back as she drinks. "I know you're touched, but you have to keep it together, baby."

Glyndon finishes drinking and stares at me from beneath her lashes. "You...made this?"

"That's what I said."

"But it's so delicious."

"And someone like me can't make something delicious?"

"That's not what I said. I'm just surprised."

"That I pay attention to your bodily needs?"

"And that you cook."

"I don't. This is the first time I've tried it."

"What?" She nearly chokes again and I keep the bottle of water on the ready. "I mean, *what*? How can you make something this tasty on your first try?"

"Internet recipes. Ever heard of them?"

"My internet recipe trials have been major disasters to the point that Mum kicked me out of the kitchen. *After* I lit the stove on fire."

"Lucky for you, I'm an okay cook."

"Are you trying to piss me off by being modest? You're like a genius."

"So everyone keeps saying today as if it's a new discovery. I was born a genius, baby."

"Don't be cocky."

"It's my charm, though."

She rolls her eyes but continues eating, releasing a satisfied noise every now and then. It's similar to a moan, but not really, and I could watch her all day.

Glyndon has grace, even while eating. There's an elegance to her movements and a regal aura to her presence. A part of me yearns to tarnish it in all the worst ways.

And protect it, too.

"I can't believe this is your first time," she mumbles after swallowing the contents of her mouth.

"Jealous much, my little rabbit?"

Her head tilts in my direction, causing the blonde and honey-colored strands to camouflage half her face. "What's with that nickname?"

"You were running fast yesterday. I liked it."

"Well, I didn't like what you did afterward. Why the hell did you post that picture on IG?"

"My, baby. Are you stalking me?" I grin. "Mom, come pick me up. I'm scared."

She smiles, then hides it. "It should be the other way around, prick."

I jokingly hit my shoulder against hers. "Got to stake a claim so no one dares to come near what's mine. Like dear old *Stuart*."

"Stop making fun of him. You're unbelievable."

"And so is your 'my type' painting. Delete that."

"No."

"Do I have to go the difficult road with this?"

Her lips part again, and she stops picking at her salad to survey her surroundings. "You can't do anything. We're in public."

"Think again." I snatch her phone from her lap and place it in front of her face, unlocking it.

When she comes out of her daze, I'm already on her Instagram and proceed to delete the 'my type' picture.

"Have you ever heard of privacy?"

"Don't believe in that word when it comes to you." While I'm at it, I go to her contacts and see what she named me.

"Psycho's cute." I kiss her cheek and she freezes as I take a selfie and then put it as the display picture. "There. Much better."

You can ogle this when you miss me."

"As if!"

I chuckle as she tries to retrieve her phone and fails. Over and over.

Finally, she gives up and throws daggers with her eyes in my direction. "Ugh. Dick."

"I see your repertoire of insults has gotten richer."

"Learned from the best."

"Happy to help. How are you going to pay me? I vote for a BJ."

"In your dreams."

"In my dreams, your blood is smeared all over my cock, so unless you want to recreate the image, I suggest you change the subject." I grab her hand and place it on my bulge.

Her cheeks turn crimson as she retracts her hand back fast. "Perv."

"If you believe that to be an insult, think again."

She releases a breath but chooses to continue eating instead.

So I prompt. "By the way, where should we go later?"

"Why do we have to go anywhere?"

"Because we're dating, or whatever label you want to put on it. In retrospect, that means you're mine."

She releases an exasperated sigh.

"Come to the mansion. Niko is throwing a party."

"Pass. That's not my scene."

"Hmm. Then what is?"

"Quiet nights. Cozy blankets and a thought-provoking film. Those types of things."

"Your idea of fun is even worse than your taste in men."

"Too bad I didn't ask for your opinion."

"Too bad you're getting it. What movie are we watching tonight? I'll bring snacks."

"We are not watching anything."

"Then come to the party."

"No."

"I wasn't asking, Glyndon. Either movie night or party night." I tilt my head to the side. "By the way, if you leave me on Read again, I'll jump onto your balcony and abort the nice phase."

GLYNDON

"Oh, please, that's such a lame fantasy."

I pause at the entrance of the flat upon hearing Ava's voice. After further inspection, I find all three girls huddled up in the living area with *Pride & Prejudice*, the 2005 version, playing on the TV.

Annika's obsession aside from Tchaikovsky.

I drop my bag in the nearest corner and join them. Cecily gets up, smooths the wrinkles on my bag, and hangs it before coming back again with a cup of tea in hand.

Her T-shirt for today says *Manifesting the ability to punch people on the internet*.

"Glyn!" Ava leans against me because she has no sense of boundaries. "Back me up on this."

"What are we discussing?"

"Fantasies," Annika says. "Cecily said her fantasy is finding a nice, normal man since that's so rare nowadays."

"It is." Cecily takes a sip of her tea. "Sorry, I'm lame."

"You're lying." Ava crosses her arms over her fuzzy pajamas. "A year ago, you said your fantasy was to be ambushed in a dark place and taken against your will."

The cup of tea shakes in Cecily's hand and she pales.

"Hey..." I inch to Cecily's side and put my hand on her shoulder, then glare at Ava, "We agreed to not talk about that again."

"Don't act high and mighty. You said something similar, too. What was it? Oh, you want to fight it and be forced to take it,

even when you say no. I can't be the only one who remembers that."

My cheeks go red as the memories return. I definitely said that back at Remi's birthday party when the three of us got drunk and talked about our forbidden fantasies.

Then we realized how fucked up those sounded and agreed to never talk about them again. Before Ava disappeared on us in the middle of the night.

Was I anticipating what would happen with Killian?

I can't believe I'm caught up in a classic 'be careful what you wish for' scenario.

Cecily's shaking. She's not the type who shakes. Now that I think about it, she looks paler than usual today, as if she's seeing a ghost everywhere she goes.

I tighten my hold on her shoulder. "We were drunk, Ava."

"It was the truest thing you two prudes have ever said." She shrugs, then grins. "What's your fantasy, Anni?"

"Uh, am I supposed to have one?"

"Of course you are. What's the first thing you thought about when you were growing up and thought to yourself, 'Shit, my parents should never know about this side of me'?"

"Oh. You mean that." Annika slides her fingers over her phone's sparkling purple case. "I guess, I always wanted to be kidnapped."

We all stare at her, dumbfounded.

Ava is the only one who chuckles. "Damn girl, now that's what I call go big or go home."

"It's not in the sense you think. I don't want to be taken from my life and family for good, I just...want to be kidnapped on the day of my wedding. You know, like in those movies? Yeah, I know it's fucked up, but uh, I guess in my mind, that's better than an arranged marriage."

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"It's okay. It's my destiny." She throws up a dismissive hand. "On a more happy note, who wants to party?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Ava jumps up and they both disappear into her room.

Cecily's still shaking.

"Ces?" I smile at her. "Are you okay?"

"What? Yeah. I'm cool. Totally cool."

"You said cool twice. Are you sure everything's all right?"

She nods.

"You know you can talk to me, right?"

Her light eyes glitter as she stares at me for a beat too long. I think she'll say something, but then she shakes her head. "You're a doll, did you know that?"

"And you're hiding something."

"We all do, Glyn," she says with a hint of sadness.

"I don't hide things from you guys."

"Yeah, right. I guess I missed the convo where a certain Killian has become the center of your attention."

"That...is not true."

"Then Anni must've been dreaming about the whole flirting session that happened at lunch yesterday."

"Oh, Anni."

"Right. Anni. She wouldn't shut up about it."

"It means nothing, Ces."

"It's okay if it does." Her expression softens. "I'm happy to see you more balanced these days, even if it's caused by a bastard from The King's U."

"Why do you hate them so much?"

"Have you missed the bastard part?"

I pull away from her, thinking about the nightmare from two days ago. I've been meaning to talk to her and Ava about this since I realized it might not have been a nightmare, after all.

"Hey, Ces."

"Hmm?" she says over the rim of her cup.

"You think I sleep better these days?"

"Totally."

"I heard you say that to Bran and Ava the night Remi brought fish and chips."

Her cup freezes halfway to her mouth, but then she takes a sip. "Oh? I must've forgotten."

"Cecily."

"What?"

"Look at me."

She casts me a fleeting glance, then focuses back on her cup. "I know your face and love it, Glyn. No need to look at it."

"You're hiding something from me."

An awkward chuckle spills from her. "You probably got things mixed up."

"I heard you. There's some filth you, Ava, and Bran are keeping from me. What is it?"

She remains silent.

"Ces, please. I'm not a little girl."

My friend releases a sigh, puts the cup on the table, and takes my hands in hers. "You're right. We shouldn't have hidden it, but we all thought you were in a fragile mental state after...Devlin."

"What is it?"

"We threw it away because that shit is disgusting, but I took a picture." She retrieves her phone and scrolls to a photo taken a few weeks ago.

My heart thunders when I see a blank canvas chaotically smeared with red paint. The words are barely legible, but I can see them loud and clear.

Why are you still breathing, Glyndon?

My mouth falls open in a wordless gasp and I stare between it and Cecily. "Where...did you find this?"

"In front of our flat. We called Bran and he said to get rid of it because, well, it would've broken you."

It would've.

"Why would anyone do this?" Cecily breathes harshly. "You're the least antagonistic person on earth. It doesn't make sense for someone to target you."

It doesn't.

Unless I got myself in bigger trouble than I thought.

I'M AT A PARTY.

And not just any party.

It's *the* party.

As in the one Killian told me to come to and I vehemently refused.

Now, I have a good excuse for the change in my decision. I wasn't thinking straight when he was around—he just rattles me too much.

But once he left, or more like, once I went to class and was separated from him, I gave it some serious thought. While half focusing on what the professor was saying.

I'm still not over the bitterness of being eliminated from the initiation at the last second for the simple reason of catching the psycho's attention. But that doesn't mean I can't get close to the inner circle and investigate Devlin's involvement in the club.

My chances of getting rid of Killian are starting to seem impossible, so I might as well use him. If it were anyone else, my upbringing would've interfered and I would have felt bad for using them, but this isn't a normal person.

Killian is a raging monster with no restraints. He targeted me first, so it's only fair that he gets a taste of his own medicine.

"I can't believe we got the chance to be here! This is like the shit!" Ava's awed shout barely reaches me over the loud music and the endless chatter.

Countless students surround the massive pool and some are soaking in the Jacuzzi while singing and shouting and producing all sorts of noise.

To say I'm reaching sensory overload in a matter of ten minutes would be an understatement.

As a weapon, I came with my partners in crime—Ava, Cecily, and Annika.

In fact, this isn't the party Annika and Ava had planned to go to earlier, considering Anni's reservations about defying her brother. It was Ava who begged and implored and bribed her with some special edition lipstick so she takes us here. Since REU students aren't allowed on The King's U campus or in the Heathens' compound, we had to use Annika as our ticket here.

If I'd told Killian I was coming, he would've given me access, but I won't be asking anything of that twat.

The only unwilling person here is Cecily, whom we had to drag along. Not only does she hate The King's U students with a passion, but she's also a lover of quiet nights like me.

We all wore dresses except for her—or actually, Ava forced me to choose one of hers. I settled on a dark red one that molds against my body and stops right above my knees. Then Anni did my makeup, gave me smoky eyes and lipstick that matches the dress, then styled my hair to fall straight to the middle of my half-bare back.

Those two definitely looked proud of their creation while I was half-horrified, half-doubtful that the one in the mirror was me.

Cecily, however, couldn't be forced to wear a dress. She's in jeans and a shirt that says *Sorry for the bitch face. Didn't want to be here.*

Her hair is pulled into a ponytail and her lips are pursed tight.

She's really been moody today, and I have a feeling it's not due to exams as she claimed.

"Who's going to be the responsible adults when these two social butterflies get drunk and we have to get them back home?" is what I told Cecily so she'd agree to come along.

I'm such a hypocrite, because really, I need them around. Cecily has always been our rock. The 'brainstorm first, act later' girl. The 'I'm here to listen' friend.

She's like a mother figure, and having her here fills me with a major boost of confidence.

"Anni!! Why didn't you tell me this scene is your usual?" Ava grabs her by the shoulder. "I have like a major girl crush right now."

They're wearing matching tulle dresses. Ava's is coral pink and Annika's is pastel purple. I swear they have something to shop for every hour.

"It's not, really." Anni casts a glance at our surroundings. "I'm not usually allowed at Jer's parties, and by usually, I mean never. The guard let us in earlier because I kind of begged."

"Don't worry, we'll protect you." Ava nudges Cecily. "Isn't that right?"

The latter grabs a red Solo cup from the table beside us and releases an unintelligible noise.

"See? Ces always has your back." Ava tells Anni with a heartfelt laugh.

I inch closer to Cecily, who's been obsessively watching the stairs. Yesterday, I thought the mansion was huge from the outside, but it's a downright castle from the inside.

There's a regal air to it mixed with splashes of gothic touches. It's undoubtedly old, probably older than both universities' centuries of age.

I heard that the three mansions scattered across the island were castles that were used as defense lines in medieval wars. Now, they're used as compounds for secret orders, illegal organizations, and twisted youths.

The Elites, the only REU club that belongs in their unholy union, is probably tame compared to The King's U's clubs.

Though I wouldn't be so sure, considering Lan leads the Elites.

"Are you okay?" I ask Cecily.

Her head whips in my direction and alcohol spills on her hand. "W-what? Why?"

"I'm just asking."

She smiles big, doing a horrible job at hiding her discomfort. "I'm fine, really. Don't worry, Glyn."

"That will just make me worry more."

"I'm a big girl, I can take care of myself. Really, never mind me."

My chest contracts and I swallow the drool that's gathered in my mouth.

Never mind me, Glyn. People like me are just not important.

Devlin's words rush back to my mind with the lethality of a storm. Red slowly creeps into my vision.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

"You matter, Ces," I choke out. "You have no clue how much you matter."

A shadow of incredulousness creeps into her features before they soften, "Thanks, Glyn. You're like the sweetest."

"What is this fucking betrayal? *I'm* the sweetest!" Ava barges in, batting her lashes. "Glyn is the doll."

Cecily raises a brow. "No, you're the one who curses like a pirate."

"And I feel so left out, I'm revoking friendship rights to all of you bitches."

We turn around at hearing Remi's distinctive voice. He's glaring down his very aristocratic—currently pissed off—nose at us while simultaneously flipping his dashing hair back.

Creigh, aka his unwilling shadow, stands a short distance away, both hands in his pockets.

"How did you guys manage to get into The King's U?" Cecily asks.

"Anni is a doll and put in a word for us with the guards." Remi's tone turns dramatically hurt. "Since when do you party without me?"

"Since, uh, I don't know, you party without us all the time?" Ava points a finger at his chest. "You don't see us revoking friendship rights, do you?"

"I can't believe this. So it's my fault that you don't come along when I ask?"

"Duh. In case you forgot, you end up ghosting us to shag anything in a skirt."

"What the actual fuck, Ava? Of course I'd choose shagging over your mimosas and drunken rants about a certain psycho. Shagging is the whole point of these parties, not your unresolved feelings!"

"Screw you, your grace."

"It's actually your lordship, but I'll take the upgrade in title." He grins. "Now, who's in the mood for an orgy?"

"Eww," Ava, Cecily and I say in unison.

Creigh raises one hand.

Annika winces. "No clue what you guys find fun about this party. Can't we get out of here? I'm game for anything Remi suggests."

"Anni, honey." Ava grabs her by the shoulder. "You should never, *ever* agree to Remi's plans. He'll leave you in an unknown place with unknown people and sod off to get his dick wet."

"I did not leave you in an unknown place with unknown people!" Remi shouts. "I was kicked out of my own house by that fucker—"

Ava slams her palm on his mouth, making him shut up mid-sentence, then glares at him, but he waggles his brows.

Having been released from Ava's hold, Annika grins and slides to Creigh's side, then nudges his shoulder with hers. "Didn't know you'd come. I would've picked a better dress."

His expression remains blank. "Why?"

She rolls her eyes, then tugs on the tulle of her skirt. "Do you like this one?"

He says nothing, continuing to focus on Remi bickering with both Cecily and Ava as usual.

Seeming oblivious to the way Creighton blatantly ignored her, Annika continues, "I didn't know you like orgies."

"I don't," he says, still not looking at her.

"You just raised your hand when Remi suggested it."

"He paid me to."

"Oh, so you don't like them. Ha. And here I was thinking about getting your attention somehow."

He finally tilts his head in her direction. "Why?"

Her smile widens now that he's looking at her. "Because I'm totally going to get you out of your shell since Remi is obviously failing. I wonder if he keeps a list of all the methods he tried so that I can maybe shrink the endless options I have in mind."

"You talk too much." Creigh simply turns and leaves.

Annika's shoulders hunch, but she soon perks up. "I really should get out of here before Jer sees me. Or at least hide."

I suppress a smile while watching them, but it slowly disappears when I catch a glimpse of Gareth heading upstairs.

It's a knee-jerk reaction, but I slip from between the others and sneak up behind him.

Since there are so many people and so much chaos around, I manage to blend in seamlessly.

When I reach upstairs, however, an ominous feeling slowly creeps up my spine. I squash it and stay on Gareth's tail as he slips away unnoticed.

He has a silent presence that's almost nonexistent when he's surrounded by godlike presences like Jeremy, Killian, and Nikolai.

However, when he's on his own, he seems...menacing. Somewhat unpredictable. But then again, one can't expect

Killian's only brother to be completely normal.

The deeper he goes into the hall, the fewer people there are. He takes a turn and I follow, but in just a fraction of a second, I realize something about the people standing near the walls.

They're different.

While downstairs is filled with uni students, the age is drastically older now.

They also have mean, angular features and stare at me with threatening poses.

In an instant, I feel myself surrounded by those creepy bunny guards from the initiation. And it's no less creepy now that they don't have the masks on.

"Looking for something?"

I startle as a hand falls on my shoulder. I whirl around to find Gareth staring down at me.

How...

I search the path ahead of me. I could've sworn I saw him take that turn. How did he show up behind me?

Is there a secret path around here?

"Uh, no," I say in response to his question, doing my best to school my reaction.

"Being lost once might be a coincidence, but twice is pushing it. So how about you tell me why you were following me."

I don't miss how the guards start to step toward me from all sides, circling me like a group of predators pouncing on their prey.

"It's not that I was following you," I'm thankful my voice sounds normal enough.

"No?"

"No."

He pauses, watching me with no change in his expression. "There's this conundrum nature specialists face in the wild. Some animals return to the trap because they know they'll find food, so they keep getting themselves live-trapped over and over and..." He steps closer. "*Over.*"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know, Glyndon. You tell me. After all, you're the one who followed me in my own house."

The crazy idea I've been entertaining since this afternoon slowly manifests and I swallow. "How about a trade?"

"What type of trade?"

"You...dislike Killian—or more like his guts and constant need to make your life hell. I can help you with keeping him off your case."

He raises a brow. "And how do you intend to do that?"

"By keeping him occupied."

He bursts out laughing, the sound echoing around us like a haunted chant. "Either you're being funny or you have no fucking clue who you're dealing with."

"I actually do. I've been constantly tormented by him since the first time we met."

Gareth's expression hardens. "And you think that means something in the great scheme of things? How long have you known him? A week? A month? That has no value or credibility."

"He's obsessed with me or something about me, and as long as he has that fixation, then I have power over him." I push up my chest. "You can discredit me all day, but you and I both know that Killian isn't the type who gives up on things halfway in."

A slight narrow of his eyes is the only change in Gareth's demeanor, but I know I've chinked his armor when he asks, "And what do you want in return?"

"I'll get straight to the point."

"By all means."

"I'm investigating my friend's death, and I was told that he was part of the Heathens' first initiation for this year. You're one of the leaders and surely have access to records, camera footage, and stuff like that?"

"What if I do?"

"If you provide me with those, I'll be your ally against Killian."

"How do I know you won't turn against me? In fact, how do I know this isn't another one of Killer's sick games?"

"I would never use my friend's life as a game." I fumble for my phone and scroll to one of the last pictures I have with Devlin. A selfie in the car. I'm smiling. He's not. Then I show it to Gareth. "Surely you remember him."

He pauses, lips thinning in a line. "Devlin."

"Yes." I breathe. "He died after the initiation."

"Didn't the police rule it as a suicide?"

"Yes, but..."

"You don't believe it."

I slowly shake my head. "Like you, I don't believe in the existence of too many coincidences."

"Fine."

"*Really?*"

"Yes. I'll help you in gathering whatever we have on the night prior to his death."

"Thank you. I'll be forever grateful."

"Your gratitude has no value to me. In return, you'll be my weapon against Killer."

"I wouldn't call myself a weapon..."

"Believe me." A slight smirk curves his lips. "You are."

That's totally not true, but I let it go when I notice the men—probably guards—slowly retreating to the shadows.

"How well did you know your friend?" Gareth asks out of nowhere.

"I knew him better than anyone."

"Did he ever mention us?"

"No...not really." Just in passing conversation and gossip like everyone on campus would glorify, glamorize, worship at the feet of The King's U's exclusive clubs.

"Then I doubt you knew him at all," Gareth says.

"Can you stop speaking in riddles?"

"Let's just say Devlin was a lot more than you think. I knew him personally and I don't know many people personally."

"That's impossible. He was shy and introverted."

"That's not true. But he was a fucking genius, I'll give him that." Gareth stares to the side, then smiles. "Now, for your end of the bargain."

He slides into my space before I can blink. His fingers lift my chin and my eyes widen as he lowers his head.

The moment his lips touch mine, he's wrenched off me in a flash.

I stare in complete disbelief as Killian sends his brother flying against the wall.

GLYNDON

The scene unfolds in slow motion.

One moment, Gareth is standing in front of me, and the next, he's being thrown against the wall with Killian in tow.

Raw power simmers from him like a deadly volcano. The type that's been dormant for centuries and decided to erupt in a fraction of a second.

I've seen Killian as a soulless devil, a ruthless monster, and an erotic god, but this is the first time I've seen him this angry.

And the most terrifying part is that his expression remains nonchalant, blank even. Despite the solid exterior, one thing gives away the state of his rage—his dead eyes.

They're not blue anymore, but more black, almost the same color as his narrow pupils. Mum once told me that some people give a 'back off' look and it should never be ignored.

This is worse than back off. This is nothing short of a declaration of war and a thirst to spill blood.

The raw power shakes me to my bones even though it's not directed at me.

Gareth, however, smiles, and it's the widest I've seen on his usually composed face. "What do we have here? The mighty Killer getting all emotional? We should FaceTime Dad to give him the news."

"Listen here, you motherfucker." Killian's clipped voice makes my stomach drop. "I have zero fucks to give about all your golden-boy actions, but touch what's mine and I'll make sure you pay the price tenfold. You know that, I know that, and your

remaining functioning neurons will know that, too, before I knock them the fuck out. I'm well aware of what you're trying to do and it's not going to work, so how about you tuck your tail where it belongs, hmm?"

"I'd say it's working perfectly. Look at all that rage, that fire, that destructive energy. How does it feel to lose the mask, little brother? You want to kill me, don't you? You've fought against your nature for nineteen years—a whole nineteen years of blending in, fooling Mom and Dad, Grandpa, Aunt. *Everyone*. You did so well and slipped into the crowd effortlessly. You even became a good boy. A fucking social icon who everyone either wants to emulate or fuck, but that holds no meaning if you're nothing more than a shell, does it?"

My lips part, trembling, and it's definitely not due to the violence from a few moments ago. That looks like a kid's game compared to this.

It's like I'm witnessing two titans warring for a position on the sun. Gareth provoked Killian on purpose, as if he's waited a long time to say that.

And the worst part is that Gareth shouldn't be like this. He wasn't *born* evil, but years of living with someone like Killian must've taught him a thing or two. And right now? He's using the words he knows will hurt his brother the most.

But at the same time, is it really right to use someone's weakness against him? How can we become different from manipulators and narcissists if we act the same way?

Killian's upper lip lifts in a snarl before a cruel smirk takes over. "So what if I am a shell? What's so grandiose about a core anyway? Should I get one like yours? Easily bruised, broken, and discarded? Easily...*forgotten*?"

All this time, Gareth has kept his hands by his sides, but now, he clutches Killian's T-shirt with enough strength to make his biceps bulge. "You're the one who's easily forgotten. After all, your girlfriend prefers me."

"That's not true," I say in a clear, surprisingly leveled voice. "I'm neither his girlfriend nor do I prefer either of you."

In hindsight, I should've never gotten between brothers, not even if it's about Devlin. There's a lot of bad mojo about getting

involved with brothers.

"Are you sure, Glyn?" Gareth is speaking to me, but his entire attention is on Killian. "Didn't you tell me you wanted to see what my lips tasted like?"

My cheeks heat, but before I can say anything, Killian punches Gareth in the face so hard, blood splatters on the wallpaper.

I shriek, still unable to move, but I search either side of me for the bodyguards from earlier. None of them are in sight, or maybe they know by experience not to get involved in their quarrels.

"Touch her again and I'll fucking kill you, Gareth. I'll make it look like an accident and have my hand on Mom's shoulder while she cries at your funeral. I'll even become Dad's golden boy and make him forget you ever existed. A few years from now, no one will visit your grave anymore and I'll be the only child this time. You'll be erased so effortlessly that not a memory of you will be left. So think carefully about that bleak ending next time you consider touching what's fucking mine."

I want to think this is an empty threat like the ones Remi makes all the time, but there's no hint of joking in his tone.

There's no hint of...second thoughts.

The fact that he probably meant every word he said forces me to take an automatic step backward, then another.

I don't look at what's behind me, scared that a mere blink will be enough to get me decapitated.

After a few steps, I turn around and run.

I have no clue where I'm going or how, but that doesn't matter as long as I'm out of here. I run and run, probably looking like a lunatic, but I still can't get away fast enough.

Or far enough.

I should probably make sure Gareth is okay, but it's not like he'll actually kill him. Besides, he survived Killian all these years, surely this one will slide, too.

Right?

My feet come to a halt soon after I round the corner. There's no way I'm going back in there, but maybe I can find Jeremy or Nikolai and tell them to break the fight apart.

I'm not one step in when a merciless hand wraps around my neck and pushes me back so forcibly, the breath is knocked out of

my lungs.

My spine hits a solid edge, a door, before it's swung back and I'm thrust inside a bedroom.

"Where do you think you're going, my little rabbit?"

Dark blue eyes crash into mine with the lethality of a natural disaster, a train wreck, and a war. *Combined.*

There's no other word to describe Killian other than intense, and I'm right in the middle of his madness. The eye of the storm.

I claw at his wrist with my nails, even though he's not squeezing. I just don't want to be at his mercy—or the lack thereof.

"You want to fight? I'll give you a reason to fight." His hold tightens and he shoves his knee between my legs, slapping them apart and thrusting his thigh against my core. "I could choke the living fuck out of you right now, and there's nothing you could do about it. Is that what you want, hmm?"

I try to shake my head, but I don't know if it moves. The lack of oxygen turns me lightheaded. The good kind. The kind that throbs in my core and against his jeans.

Shit.

Please don't tell me this is what I think it is.

My senses are heightened to an extent I've never felt before. My head thrums in an irregular rhythm causing my eyes to droop, but I can smell him deep in my bones. The woodsy, amber scent is no different than an intoxicating substance. Like alcohol.

Or drugs.

No, probably worse.

My stomach quivers as I inhale every painstaking drag, on and on, my belly drops and fills and empties in a rhythm I can't keep up with.

But the worst part is that my hands that are clawing at any part I can reach, but I don't think it's to push him off me anymore. I just want the pads of my fingers on his skin, my blunt nails leaving marks on him as he does on me.

"Or maybe you'd like that." He presses his thumb against my pulse point with the brutality of a savage animal. "Maybe being choked turns you the fuck on like it makes me fucking hard."

I should be appalled by the suggestion, should try to scratch his eyes out, but something entirely different slips from my mouth.

A moan.

I want to find excuses, to say it's a moan of pain, or discomfort, but I can't think straight, let alone attempt to trick my brain.

Killian's lips pull in a cruel smirk. He's not happy about this, on the contrary, the anger from earlier is slowly gathering in the stormy blues of his eyes.

They're a shade darker now.

Charcoal, black, and every cold hue that hasn't seen the sun.

"I knew you were more than your looks suggested. You had this clean, innocent, and utterly pretty aura, but really, you're nothing more than a dirty little whore, aren't you? All this fighting and running and fucking shenanigans were just a way to provoke me so I'd throw you down and fuck you on all fours like a fucking animal. Or maybe so I'd shove you headfirst against the nearest surface, like this wall, and fill you up with my cum."

His free hand slides over my aching breasts and he cups one violently. "Tell me, were you thinking of me when you wore this red dress or was it for Gareth?"

Pleasure starts where he's touching my breasts and ends in my core, and all I can do is focus on it.

"Answer the fucking question, Glyndon. Is he the one you wanted to feel up these pretty little tits and make these perky nipples all hard?" He pinches one and I gasp. "You always wanted the nice guy; too bad you got the fucking villain."

"It wasn't him..." I choke out.

"Come again?" He loosens his grip so I can breathe properly.

"The dress is for...you," I admit on a breath.

I think that will delight him, but his face remains on the edge.

"It was for me, huh?" His hand slides from my breast to my hip, then he shoves the skirt of my dress to my waist, exposing my thighs and underwear. "You even put on lace panties and came prepared to be fucked." He rubs his fingers against them and I can't pretend to close my eyes out of pure mortification. "Are you sure it's for me? Or are you saying that to please me?"

I shake my head.

"The thought of you dolling up to seduce my brother drives me fucking insane. The thought of you imagining his fucking fingers on *my* pussy while you were cleaning and dressing it makes me see red."

His fingers tighten on my throat and it's like I'm gasping for air through a straw again.

And the most embarrassing part is, my undies are utterly soaked, and I think he feels it. I think he knows exactly the type of effect he has on me.

"Did you think I'd let him touch what's mine and live to talk about it?" He tugs me close by the neck and tilts his head down until his lips nearly touch mine and I can see my reflection in his savage eyes.

Do I really look that aroused?

I yelp as he yanks down my underwear and thrusts three fingers inside me at the same time.

A choked sob tears from my throat, and although it should be due to pain or discomfort, it's actually due to relief.

I've been in a constant mode of stimulation ever since he strangled me and it's only gotten worse with time.

"Feel that? That's your cunt welcoming my fingers home. That's your cunt knowing who the fuck owns it, touches it, and brings it pleasure. If someone dares to look at it, let alone contemplate touching it, they'll be an MIA statistic, am I clear?"

A whimper rips from me and it's sick.

I'm sick.

He's clearly threatening to hurt people, but I can't seem to take that into account as I drip all over his fingers, rocking my hips unconsciously at first, then intentionally.

"This is my pussy." *Thrust.* "My property." *Thrust.* "Fucking mine."

A strangled gasp spills from my throat as my core pulses for the orgasm.

But just when I'm about to scream, he pulls out his fingers.

My eyes widen, staring at him, then at the place that he definitely didn't satisfy.

"You don't get to come after that little show of yours. This isn't a reward."

A frustrated sound echoes in the air and I realize it's mine when he picks me up and throws me on the bed.

I can breathe for the first time, but I don't focus on the animal-like sounds escaping me or the ache between my legs.

There's something much worse.

Killian.

He tugs his shirt over his head, revealing the hard planes of his abs and stomach. Under the current tension, his physique appears massive, a weapon that can inflict both pleasure and pain.

Even the birds with broken feathers flying up his side appear more ominous. Destructive.

Killian proceeds to remove his trousers and boxers with infinite ease. He actually takes his time with the task, as if knowing exactly how nervous his methodical calm makes me.

I slide back against the mattress. "W-what do you think you're doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" He steps toward me with the grace of a black panther. "Finishing what I started."

"Killian..."

"Yes, Glyndon?"

"Stop... I mean, let's talk about this."

"I'm done talking."

"I'll scream."

"By all means, do. No one will hear you, and if they do, we can fuck on their blood if you're not squeamish."

I think I'm going to throw up. I wish this was him trying to scare me and that deep down, these were empty words, but this is Killian, after all.

He's on me now, his hand fisting my dress. I try to stop him as he pulls the piece of clothing over my head and throws it away. I try to fight as he unclasps my bra and slings it to the floor. And in my attempts, I don't think about what I'm doing—my hands flying everywhere until I'm naked in his arms.

It's panic, I think.

If I don't get a hold of myself, I'm going to lose before I even start.

Killian is on top of me, and his fingers flick my nipples so that both of them harden to sensitive peaks. "I'm never going to get enough of your gorgeous fucking tits."

I place a shaky hand on his chest, on the physical perfection that is his abdomen and cut muscles and try to smooth my voice as much as possible. "You said you'd give me time."

He doesn't remove my hand, but he doesn't push me down and force my legs open either. His fingers continue flicking my nipple back and forth, back and forth in an agonizing rhythm.

"That was before you decided it was a good idea to seduce my brother."

"I didn't seduce him."

"His lips were on yours."

"Like Cherry's lips and tongue were on yours."

"Your jealousy turns me the fuck on, but I didn't kiss Cherry. She kissed me."

"And I didn't kiss Gareth."

"Hmm." He pinches my nipple hard and I whimper. "Is that so?"

"Yes, I promise. I didn't want to kiss him."

"Or see what his lips taste like?"

"Or that." I soften my voice.

"Good call. They're probably disgusting." He's caressing my nipples now, more pleasure than pain, but it's the mild type of pleasure, the pleasure that's not enough to stimulate my core, but I can put up with it if I can tame the tiger.

"Killian, please." I test the waters and push him. He surprisingly lets me, so I do it again until he's almost on his back.

But before he lies down, he becomes as hard as granite. "Nice try, baby. You almost got me there. I'm so fucking proud of how your cunning nature shows through."

My breath hitches as he opens my legs wide and settles between them. "But we've got a score to settle. See, all types of parasites keep floating around you because I didn't stake my claim yet, and that needs to change."

I slowly close my eyes, admitting defeat. And the moment I do, a feeling I never thought I'd be experiencing under the circumstances washes over me.

Relief.

Complete, utter, and unmatched relief.

"Are you going to hurt me?" I murmur.

"Do you want me to?"

"Yes." My word is barely a murmur, but it feels so right, so liberating.

"I'll try not to hurt you...much."

Don't try, I want to say but keep it to myself.

"Eyes on me when I fuck you, baby."

I don't want to.

That will just remind me of what I am. Of what type of deviant I've become.

Killian is the worst monster I know, but he's the only person I've wanted with twisted depravity.

The only person who provokes the hidden part of me from the shadows and makes me stare at them under the light.

It's uncomfortable at first, but as time goes on, it's...so peaceful.

"I said"—his fingers squeeze my throat as he lifts my leg high and thrusts inside me in one ruthless go—"look at me."

My eyes shoot open, clashing with his as searing pain tears me from the inside.

"Fuck," he grunts. "I knew you'd be so tight and fucking perfect for me, baby."

I shriek from the pain and something else I can't pinpoint. Oh God, I'm the wettest I've ever been in my life, but it still hurts.

It hurts so much that tears slide down my cheeks.

It hurts so much that pleasure pools between my legs.

The addition of his fingers on my neck adds a primitive type of stimulation that robs my breaths and thoughts.

It's like an out-of-body experience where I'm floating in a parallel universe that only my mind can reach.

"Your blood is making a mess of the sheets," Killian groans. "Do you see the welcoming ceremony your cunt is holding for me?"

I shake my head, but he lifts me up by his grip on my neck and makes me see the blotches of blood on the white covers. He makes me see the in and out of his cock that's covered with both blood and arousal as he rams into me.

His intensity increases with each passing second and so does the firm hold he has on my neck.

"Mmm. I knew red was my favorite color."

He pushes me on my back again and pins me in place so effortlessly, it makes me quiver.

A bizarre emotion floats through me the more he's in control. The more he dominates me, making me utterly helpless.

Without words, he's telling me that I have no say in this, that if he wants to ruin me, he will. That if he wants to break me, he will.

Instead of hurting me, he's choosing to fuck me.

Not so nicely, definitely without a gentle bone in his body, but I can tell he was holding back when he first entered me earlier.

I can also tell that it didn't come naturally to him and he probably struggled with restraining his beast.

I can tell because the rocking of his hips has increased in intensity. My body slides across the mattress and if it weren't for his palm angling my thigh and his grip on my throat, I'd be tumbling off the bed.

He touches with such nonnegotiable dominance that the only thing I can do is surrender and completely let go.

With each thrust, he goes deeper, stronger. The sound of my arousal and the in and out movements make me delirious and downright mad.

No one told me there would be an infinite amount of emotions flowing through me all at once.

No one told me it'd be this...otherworldly.

Pleasure pools between my thighs and the sharp ache subsides. There's still some pain, probably from how big he is, but it's muted by the pulsing erotic friction that happens right after.

Then he hits a secret spot, once, twice. My mouth opens in a wordless cry before all sorts of noises escape me.

"Look at how much of a mess you are, little rabbit. You sure you didn't want me to fuck you not too long ago? Because you

were made for my cock." He settles on his knees and throws my foot on his shoulder. "Keep it there, baby, and you may want to hold on to the sheets."

I don't understand what he's doing until he slides almost all the way out, then pounds in again. The different angle gives him a new depth that makes my lips fall open.

The beat of my heart jumps on and on until I'm scared it'll be on the floor.

I can't constrain the noises that slip out of my mouth, and even as I grip the sheets, it's impossible to hold on in the midst of his animalistic rhythm that gets more intense with each second.

"Killian...slow down..."

His eyes rage with a color I've never seen before—a lighter blue, a living blue. A blue so bright, it's almost impossible to imagine it on someone like him.

He thrusts in again, deeper. "I don't think I can keep my promise about not hurting you much, baby."

I rock my hips and release the sheets to place a shaky palm on his chest as I lift myself up. I think he'll slap my hand away since he didn't really like me touching him yesterday.

But he lets me get up a little, loosening his hold on my neck, though he doesn't release me. We change positions so that I'm cocooned in his arms as I'm sitting up more.

"It's okay..." I whisper, trying to match his in and out.

"If you think doing that will make me finish faster and get me off your case..." he trails off, his rhythm faltering for a bit when I slide my palm from his chest to his neck and then to his cheek.

"What the fuck are you doing now?"

"Connection, ever heard of it?"

"Don't be stupid. If you fall for me, you'll only get hurt."

"The fact that you worry about me getting hurt is enough."

"Not worry." *Thrust.* "Think."

"At least you're thinking about me." My voice breaks.

"Don't romanticize me or you'll be eaten alive."

"Aren't you eating me already?"

"This is not eating. This is an appetizer."

I believe every word he says, and I know what's coming is probably worse, but I still close the distance between us and

brush my lips against his. They're surprisingly soft, though thinned and a bit mean, like him.

"How about this then?" I whisper against his mouth.

"Still not eating." He shoves me down on his lap and pounds into me from below. "Open your mouth."

When I do, he angles my jaw up with his thumb. "Tongue out."

I slowly stick it out, and he sucks it into his mouth, biting on it and kissing me open-mouthed, his lips clashing with mine at the same rhythm as his cock is plowing inside me.

There's no way I'll last long.

I don't.

My whole body is caught in a trance, being completely and utterly ravaged by a monster.

Completely and utterly satiated.

I come with a cry that he swallows with his lips, allowing me only fragments of air.

But he goes on and on until I think he'll never come.

He stops every few minutes to change positions. First, I'm on my side, then I'm lying facedown and he's on top of me. Next, I'm on all fours, and he's behind me. The entire time, he bites me—on my breasts, my shoulders, my hips, my thighs—anywhere his mouth can reach.

Finally, he puts me on his lap again and his back straightens. His hand on my throat tightens as his lips trap and suck mine, turning them all bruised.

"Fuck," he grunts as his hips jerk. "Fucking fuck, I could stay in your cunt forever."

Then I feel him twitching and releasing deep inside me. He pulls out, then gathers his cum with his fingers and thrusts them back in me. Over and over until I think I'm going to come again.

"We can't have you wasting any drops."

I'm half-dazed, not able to make out my surroundings, but I can feel him placing me on the mattress.

I can also feel his warmth gone before he's back again and something tender is placed between my legs.

A whole-body shudder goes through me when he kisses my folds and whispers against them, "You saved this cunt for me because I'm the only one who gets to own it, baby."

KILLIAN

T^{ap.}
Tap.
Tap.

The sound of my fingers drumming on the chair's armrest flows with a steady rhythm.

But there's no flicker of serenity in my bones. In fact, the raging storm from earlier has heightened to distances I haven't experienced before.

The chaos from the house has died down with everyone leaving or scattering all over the property like rats.

And I'm here.

In the semi-darkness—my natural habitat—staring at the girl who's fucking up my whole system.

Glyndon has been fast asleep since I stuffed her full of my cum. When I pulled out, her blood was all over my cock and the sheets, and that scene made me hard all over again. But since she's a spoilsport, she passed out.

I didn't change the sheets. I let her lie there, nude, her legs sprawled and with some dried blood between her thighs. It's a scene I've been watching from my position on the chair opposite the bed while burning one cigarette after the other.

Glyndon is oblivious to the irritating change happening within me—that has little to do with the state of my semi-hard cock—since she continues slumbering. Her swollen lips are slightly parted, her cheeks are a light shade of red, and violet marks cover her tits, her hips, her neck, her stomach, her thighs.

Everywhere.

She's a map of my creation. A potential masterpiece in the making, and yet, it's not...*enough*.

Early on, I knew that I needed stimulation to drown out the constant need for more.

And more.

And fucking more.

Dad noticed my tendencies and put me in high-pressure sports and took me hunting. Those were his solutions to satisfy my inhumane need for euphoria.

However, they couldn't last for long and the urge outshined them. So I started to fight and fuck every moving human. I took it to hardcore lengths that only exist in snuff movies.

But sex was only a temporary solution. A Band-Aid. A painkiller that lost its effect soon after the act ended. Sometimes, during.

I'd lose interest and the only reason I'd keep fucking was so it would end, hoping, and being disappointed, in a mediocre release.

Oftentimes, sex bored me to tears, even with whips, gags, and ropes.

Oftentimes, I'd go without it for weeks on end because the hassle and drama related to finding a fuckable hole wasn't worth it.

It wasn't until that night at the cliff that I had my strongest and fastest release in...forever.

I figured the actual fucking would be more satisfying, but I had no clue that it'd tread into unknown territory. I have good enough deduction skills to realize how much Glyndon turns me on without trying—still can't pinpoint why exactly—but the attraction is undoubtedly there.

What I didn't realize, however, is the level of release I could have with her. It's similar to that first time I cut open the mice and saw what was inside them. It's the thrill of possessing someone's life between my fingers. Literally.

I could've snapped her fragile throat with a flick of my hand and sent her to a different universe. But instead of fighting as usual, she surrendered to it, and even came because of it.

Glyndon trusted me not to break her neck.

She shouldn't have.

I don't usually choke with my bare hands, because even I don't trust my own strength or bloodlust. My demons could take over at any time and make me kill someone accidentally. And then there would be the hassle of hiding the crime and blah fucking blah.

Impulse control is my forte, but that wasn't the case when I was inside this fucking girl. My impulse got out of control and I know because I contemplated choking her to death as she was falling apart on my cock.

But she did something.

Something I don't usually allow, because it chips away at my control.

Glyndon, the seemingly innocent, absolutely clueless little rabbit *touched* me.

Over and over.

And fucking over again.

She was hesitant at first, quivering like a frail leaf, but the moment I allowed her an inch, she became bold and took a mile.

Her palm was on my chest, my neck, and all over my face. She didn't stop touching me as I kissed her, bit her lips, and tasted her blood.

She didn't stop touching me, holding on to me, fucking injecting her venom into my veins until all I could breathe was her arousal and her motherfucking fruity perfume.

I release a long puff of smoke, tilting my head as she rolls to her back, her legs slightly parted. Her pink pussy is in full view, performing some wordless mojo to draw me close.

The thought of anyone but me seeing her in this position tightens my muscles with the need for violence.

My blood boils at the reminder of Gareth's lips touching hers, slamming against hers, tasting hers before I had the chance to.

Maybe I should incapacitate him, after all, bring him down a notch. Or maybe I need to play on his useless pride and fragile fucking ego so that he won't ponder touching what's mine again.

The thought of violence spreads all over my system and I kill the cigarette, then slowly rise from my chair.

Now, I need to point out that the discomfort from my hard-on is a hassle, but I manage to repress the urge to ram into her cunt raw.

If it were anyone else, I wouldn't give a fuck—actually, I wouldn't want them right after I fucked them anyway.

But for some reason, I don't want to hurt her further...for now. She was begging me to slow down earlier, crying into the pillow and telling me in that sweet little voice of hers that she couldn't take it anymore.

And while that turned me on and made her come more times than either of us can count, I probably pushed her beyond her limits.

I settle at the foot of the bed on my knees and grab her ankles, sliding her in my direction.

A low whine slips from her lips, but she doesn't move as I throw her legs over each of my shoulders.

The pads of my fingers dig gently in the flesh of her legs, pushing them open before I lick her inner thigh.

I cleaned her up earlier. Again, something I don't usually do, but I wanted to for her, yet there's some of her dried blood. So I lick that up, too, my tongue feasting on the taste of her arousal.

The sight of my cum mixed with her juices fills me with a raging sense of possessiveness and I glide my way from her slit to the opening of her cunt.

Glyndon's moans echo in the air, and small fingers thread in my hair. I lift my head, and sure enough, her eyes are still closed, but her tits rise and fall in an increased rhythm. The sight of her engorged pink nipples is enough to make me want to fuck them.

I save that thought for another day and tease her folds with my free fingers. She arches her back, her temperature rising. When I feel she's close, I thrust my tongue inside her opening.

Glyndon jerks in my hold and whimpers. My movements become more controlled as I ram in and out of her opening, tongue-fucking her as if my dick is deep inside her. Then I eat her out until she's shuddering and her fingers tug at my hair.

When I feel the wave subsiding, I lift my head and meet her half-open eyes.

"Oh, my God," she breathes out.

"That's right, your god. Worship at my altar, baby."

I lick my lips, doing a show of darting my tongue out to catch every drip of her intoxicating arousal. I've never cared for eating pussy, but I could feast on hers for fucking eternity.

"You're finally awake, sunshine. I was getting bored. Though the nude show was a nice distraction. Did I mention that I love it when you're naked? Just for me, though, because if anyone else sees you naked, we'll have a homicide on our hands, and that would just be tragic *and* complicated."

Her stomach and tits are still rising and falling in an irregular rhythm as she swallows. "You...didn't."

"What? Commit homicide? Not yet, but my brother thinks it's a matter of when, not if."

"I mean *this*." She tries to push back, but my hold on her thighs keeps her pinned in place. "Did you just go down on me while I was asleep?"

A grin lifts my lips. "You couldn't have been that asleep if you came all over my tongue. Also, I told you that your foul, pretty mouth turns me on, so unless you're in the mood for round twenty, you should restrain it for a bit."

A crimson hue covers her cheeks and she turns her head to the side, her fingers digging into the sheets. Then, because she likes provoking me for sport, she tries to pull her leg from my hold again.

"Don't do that." I pinch her clit and she gasps, the sound affecting me more than should be allowed. "If you attempt to withdraw from me again, it'll only piss me off."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Should I rejoice at being touched by you? Throw a party or something?"

"Watch it." My jaw tightens.

"Or what? You'll fuck me?" She huffs. "You already got the virginity kink out of your system."

"That's only the beginning, not the end, baby." I let her legs fall to the mattress and crawl over her body until my chest covers hers. Then realizing I'm probably crushing her, I flip us so that my back meets the mattress and she's on top of me.

To make sure she doesn't try any funny business, I trap her legs between mine and I let my fingers get lost in her hair,

messing it up a little.

Messing *her* up a little.

Sometimes, she's so perfect it pisses me the fuck off.

Because while Gareth's words mean shit to me, he's right about the shell part. She has a core. I don't.

The fact that our differences will always be a wall between us fills me with more rage.

She leans on her hands that are on my chest and lifts her head to stare down at me with a furrowed brow. "The beginning, not the end? What is that supposed to mean?"

"Beats me," I say absentmindedly, watching the path my fingers make through her brown-blond hair and down her throat. My senses are currently obsessed with the booming pulse point that nearly pops out of her greenish vein.

I wonder how it looks on the inside, in the middle of all the blood. What else could I find?

But that would mean I'd have to open her up for it, like all those postmortem patients, and the idea sends a queasy feeling to my stomach.

If I do see inside her, I'll lose her voice, her warmth, her temper, and even her irritating fight. Everything.

I don't want her dead.

Fuck.

I actually don't want her dead and I'm ready to fight my demons so they'll abandon the urge to see inside her.

"You wanted my virginity and you got it. What else do you want?" Her spooked voice makes me fucking hard, and that's an inconvenience, considering my attempts to take it easy on her.

"I never said I only wanted your virginity. That's your own assumption and I hold no responsibility for it. Besides, now that the hymen is out of the way, I can fuck you whenever and however I please without having to deal with your overdramatic side."

She releases a shaky breath. "How long do I have to open my legs for you to get enough?"

"Still haven't decided yet, and stop acting like you don't enjoy this when your taste is still on my tongue and your screams of

pleasure are echoing in my ears. I might look calm, but your attitude is grating on my last fucking nerve."

Her glare remains in place, and I know it's taking her some effort, because she's shaking against me, obviously scared, but still refuses to back the fuck down. "Look at that. Now you know how I feel all the time."

"Your sarcasm game has upgraded."

"Learned from the best." Probably figuring out that she has no way to go, she relaxes and lays her head on her hands. "Is this your room?"

I make an affirmative sound and she does a long sweep of the all black and white furniture, curtains, and desk. The only break of color is a red toy car I've had since I was a kid.

"It's...impersonal," she whispers.

"Personal is overrated."

"Can you not be all pragmatic for a second?"

"How else will I have you flushing like a virgin? Oh, sorry, you're no longer one."

"Very funny."

I grin, locking a blonde strand between my fingers. "I live to entertain."

She narrows her eyes at me. "You look so pleased with yourself."

"That's because I am." I rub my semi-hard erection against her stomach. "Have you rested enough for another round?"

"Please don't. I'm so sore I can barely breathe without feeling discomfort."

"You mean feeling my cock inside you." I smile when she blushes again and I grab her ass cheek in one palm, making her moan.

"What are you doing?"

"Relax. I'm not going to fuck you."

She eyes me suspiciously. "You really won't?"

"Not if you're in so much pain. After all, you said please." I stroke the skin of her ass, then slide my palm up to her hips until I feel her relax against me.

But she keeps watching me with a distrustful edge.

"What?"

"I just can't believe you'd actually be stopped by a please. If I'd known, I would've begged more earlier."

"That wouldn't have stopped me. If I decide to fuck *my* pussy, no one, you included, will be able to stop me."

"You're telling me you don't want to fuck me now?"

"I do, but I also don't want to hurt you."

"You did that night at the cliff." Her voice is soft.

"I know you're not ready to admit it, but I felt something from you or I wouldn't have continued."

"Something like what?"

"Your desire."

"No way would I have felt desire for you under those circumstances. You're just making excuses."

"No, I'm just telling you my side of the story."

"So you're not even sorry?"

"You know I don't feel that. And I will not apologize for something we both enjoyed."

"I did *not* enjoy it." Her shoulders shake with how much she's trying to suppress her nature.

I want to push her more, to make her admit to her true self, but what the fuck will I do if she starts crying?

Her tears, outside of sex, do shit to me. The bad type of shit.

When I remain silent, she wiggles in my hold, and to my surprise, it's not to pull away but more to find a better position.

"Also, you didn't use a condom just now."

"So? I know you're on birth control."

"How did you know that? Pretty sure I didn't post it on IG."

"But you had your IUD insertion at the hospital I intern in. I have access to records."

"Ever heard of patient privacy?"

"Yeah. The professors bitch about it all the time."

"And you still breached it. That's illegal, you know."

"Never stopped me before."

"Then...how about STDs, aren't you like Mr. Manwhore or something?"

"No, Miss Ex-Virgin. I am not a manwhore. In fact, I didn't have sex the past two months and I'm clean. I always use condoms."

"Not with me."

"Not with you," I repeat. "How else would I have felt your blood on my cock?"

"Would you stop talking like a creep?"

"A hot creep."

"A creep is a creep." She clears her throat. "I can't believe you were celibate for two whole months."

"Miracles happen."

"Why?"

"Because sex started to get dull and I would rather not be bored to death."

"I find that hard to believe, considering your persistence of fucking me."

"You're different."

I can feel the moment her heartbeat quickens against my chest even as her face remains the same.

New resolution—always be in a position to feel her pulse, because that beautiful fucker never lies.

Unlike her.

"Is that why you're giving me time out? Because I'm different?"

"I told you, I can be nice."

She snorts. "You should really stop calling your down version nice when it's merely a calm phase."

"*Down* version?"

"You have those moments where you're slightly amicable, but they're often drowned out by your devil side."

"Because you provoke it."

"So it's my fault that your nature is devilish."

"No. But you can bring out my nice side if you choose to. It'd take effort since it doesn't come naturally to me, but it can be done."

"And how do I do that?"

"You don't have to try sometimes. Like right now. Just having you this docile in my arms is enough."

Her lips part, which is either an indication of surprise or being touched, or both. Hopefully, it's both.

I like getting under her skin. It's as close as I can get to seeing inside her without having her blood decorate my carpet.

She clears her throat. "Can I ask you something?"

"You already did."

She rolls her eyes. "Can I ask another question?"

"You don't have to ask for permission to ask me anything."

Her throat works up and down with a swallow and I can barely resist the need to wrap my fingers around her neck.

This is bad.

I don't usually like strangling outside of sex. But maybe the nudity status of our bodies is what's triggering this.

Or I choose to believe that.

"Earlier, if I'd said no and asked you to stop, would you have stopped?"

"Why are you asking a hypothetical question when everything is said and done?"

"Because."

"Bullshit. You feel guilty that you wanted me and you're trying to convince yourself that you couldn't have stopped this even if you'd tried."

"Could I have stopped it?" she whispers.

"Maybe or maybe not."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one you'll get."

She releases a frustrated sound then remains silent, probably thinking of methods to get what she wants or piss me off. She seems to have a knack for those.

After a while of complete silence, she reaches a hand to my side. It's hesitant at first before she becomes bolder and slides her fingers over my skin.

"Why did you get ravens as tattoos?"

"They're crows, not ravens."

"There's not much of a difference."

"On the contrary. Ravens are all about bad omens and ill-fate terminology I don't believe in."

"Don't crows have the same symbolism?"

"No. Crows are all about death—more spiritual than physical. I got these tattoos after I killed the impulsive, low on self-control,

blatantly violent Killian. He was a disgrace to the balanced me from the present."

"Or he just wanted to be understood." Her soft murmur echoes in the air, then she purses her lips as if regretting what she said.

My body goes rigid. That's the first fucking time someone ever said that about my less sophisticated version.

And I don't know whether or not I should strangle her for it.

I wrap my arms around her middle and lift her up with me as I rise to my feet.

She gasps and automatically holds on to me as I step to the bathroom. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to take care of your pesky soreness before I fuck you again."

GLYNDON

"I *expected betrayal from anyone in the world, but not from you, Glyn. Are you really abandoning me?"*

My eyes snap open and a guttural noise echoes in the air. It's my breathing, I realize, as I swallow the drool that's gathered in my mouth.

I attempt to stand up, but a weight pins me in place.

Killian.

Or more like, his huge body.

I blink the sleep from my eyes at the feel of his bare skin on mine. I'm still on top of his chest, my softness draped over his hardness. I feel so small in his arms, but also...so protected.

I didn't even think about his monster nature when I fell asleep cocooned by him after the bath.

What started as a cure to my soreness ended up with me fucked at the edge of the bathtub with my arse in the air and my fingers holding on to the wall for dear life. Literally.

Although I came twice, Killian took his sweet time, even more than the first time, and I honestly thought I would pass out from all the stimulation slashing through me.

When he finally finished, he kissed my forehead like some adoring lover and left me to soak in the water, half-dazed, sorer than the first time, but so utterly elated.

Then he left the bathroom and came back to help me rinse, then carried me to the bed whose sheets had been changed.

When I wanted to put on my clothes, he pushed my hand away. "Don't. I want access to my pussy during the night."

“Not unless you’re in the mood to drive me to the A&E in the morning.”

He merely chuckled, muttered, “Adorable,” then held me on top of him as if that was the most natural position in the world.

I’m the type who barely sleeps in unknown places. It’s a defense mechanism so that I can flee whenever possible.

So how could I sleep in the devil’s arms?

Though he’s a gorgeous devil with a body of steel. Even as he sleeps, I feel the hardness of his stomach and chest against my breasts and belly and his...dick between my legs. It’s definitely semi-hard and ready for more.

Does he ever get enough?

Actually, no. I don’t want to know the answer to that.

I lift my head to stare at his face. It’s almost as if he’s awake—the same eternal expression, the blankness in it, the hard edges of his features that belong to a model.

His attractive looks have always been a weapon in his games of destruction, so I tried to pay them no mind, but he’s so handsome. So cruelly beautiful. I could stare at him all day.

And I’m beginning to glamorize the bastard.

Which is dangerous.

Reaching behind me, I pull on his hand that’s spread across my back and slowly let it drop to the mattress.

I wait for a second, holding my breath, in case he moves.

When he doesn’t, I plant my palms on either side of his face and lift myself up. His dick slides from between my thighs and a low grunt leaves his lips.

I freeze, expecting to be pinned down by his lethal eyes and massive weight, but he remains in place.

Phew.

God, I could kill him right now. Maybe suffocate him while he sleeps and rid the world of his brand of evil.

But even as I entertain the thought, it’s just not who I am.

With huge discomfort and bursts of pain, I finally manage to stumble out of the bed. It takes me a few tries with lots of panting and internal cursing to put on my clothes—without underwear because I can’t find it.

It’s probably ruined anyway.

After fetching my phone from the floor, I wince at the dozen texts from my friends, then slip it in my bra and pause when I realize I smell like him. Woodsy like his shower gel that he lathered me with, but I also smell of sex.

That I'm beginning to only associate with him.

I cast one last glance at the room.

It's as clinical as Killian. So impersonal that it could be anyone else's bedroom if not for the medical books on the shelves.

I step backward, keeping my sights on him. There's no way I'll give him my back after earlier.

It cost me my virginity.

Not that I ever considered it anything special. I'd really never found anyone I wanted to give it up to, even if that made me the outcast at my previous school and with my friends.

Not to mention that any boyfriends I had in school were personally vetted by Landon, and something tells me he threatened them with murder if they touched me.

It bothered me a little, but not enough for me to throw a tantrum.

Truth is, I was too apathetic, and as much as I hate to admit it, I never wanted anyone with the same fire that I feel for Killian.

But I'm starting to learn he's not only after my virginity as I initially thought.

Killian will keep escalating, like war—he'll want more and more until I'm completely spent.

Until I have nothing left to give.

He's that type of intensity. The storm you only feel when it's wrecking you from the inside.

Literally and figuratively.

So I have to try and stay away and put up defenses. It'll drain me and I'll probably hate myself for it, too, but that's okay.

I can do this.

Slowly, I open the door and step outside barefoot while holding my flats in hand.

Once I'm a safe distance away, I put them on and head to where I remember the stairs to be.

I pass several rooms—definitely a lot more than four people need. This mansion could easily house an army.

Or maybe ghosts.

The gothic quality with its baroque wallpaper, somber furniture, and ancient-looking candelabras definitely give it the right atmosphere for underworld meetings.

The only light comes from the dim crystal chandeliers hanging over halls and above the circular stairs.

Eerie silence permeates the air and it doesn't help that it's four in the morning. I become super conscious of the *thud, thud, thud* of my heartbeat.

Calm down, me. It's not like I'm doing something wrong. I'm just trying to leave.

Though maybe I can snoop around in case there's something to uncover about Devlin.

I quickly shake that idea away. I'll just get caught, whether by the guards or by Killian. And I really can't afford to be held captive by that monster again after I finally managed to escape his destructive orbit.

Besides, Gareth and I have a deal. He already kissed me, got me in trouble with Killian, and used his part of the bargain to his heart's content.

"What do you mean they're in my territory?"

My feet come to a halt at the base of the stairs at what I'm sure is Jeremy's voice.

There's a distinguishable harshness in it, an edge that quietly simmers under the surface.

It's late, but that obviously holds no importance to Jeremy since he sounds wide awake.

"It all adds up with the timeline." Gareth's voice echoes in the air with eternal calm.

I feel like a rookie spy as sweat trickles down my back, and I hold my breath until I struggle with inhaling oxygen.

From the sound of their voices, they're in a downstairs room that's not far from the stairs.

"Is it a snake we know?" Jeremy asks.

"Probably."

"The cockroaches are getting bold if they think they can barge into my territory as they please."

Snakes?

Do they mean the Serpents? As in, the other powerful secret club that's a complete mystery to the public? I don't think they do initiations like the Heathens or the Elites.

The only thing known about them is that the Serpents exist, and they make their presence known by acts of complete anarchy.

The moment the public starts to forget about them, arson, damage of property, and other crimes hit the headlines.

"What will you do about it?" Gareth asks.

"Pay them back their dues, of course."

"Your father won't be happy if he knows you actively hurt someone from the Bratva."

"That's why he won't know. Besides, he of all people realizes that if I don't kill, I'll be killed. The fight for the top starts right now, Gaz."

Wait...

Does that mean the Serpents are also Russian mafia? I figured they'd be some sort of mafia, but how come they're actively competing with Jeremy and Nikolai, who are from the same organization?

I take a step forward, my curiosity getting the better of me. I probably shouldn't be privy to this information, but something tells me it's important in the great scheme of things.

My foot trips over something big and hard, and I shriek as I tumble forward, gripping the railing for balance so that I don't end up on my face.

A person. That's what I stumbled over.

And he's lying at the bottom of the stairs. No kidding. He's on the carpet, facedown.

When I accidentally hit him, he grumbles, "Can't anyone fucking sleep in this motherfucking house?"

I grip the railing tighter, staring at none other than Nikolai. He's in boxers. That's all.

His chest and back are a map of tattoos. Couple that with his messy long hair, angular features, and furrowed brow, and he has all it takes to induce fear into anyone's soul.

"I'm sorry, I didn't see you there," I whisper and resist adding that I didn't expect to find someone sleeping at the bottom of the stairs, considering all the rooms upstairs.

Nikolai narrows one of his eyes, then in one swift movement, he jumps up to his full height and barges into my space.

I automatically step back, but my shoes hit the step and I'm trapped under his scrutiny.

It's like I'm being sized up for dinner—or something much more nefarious. I could swear there's a glint in his eyes, the one hunters get after spotting prey, but it soon vanishes.

"Nope, not the right one." The disappointment in his tone makes me pause.

But I don't have time to think about his words before Jeremy and Gareth stalk in from wherever they were.

Fully clothed, thank God.

"Didn't know we had a guest," Jeremy says casually, his voice losing all the tension from a minute ago.

Gareth slides a hand in his pocket, his expression is unreadable. "Killer's guest."

I can feel my ears heating. He probably knows what we've been up to.

God, can the earth open up and swallow me, please?

Jeremy studies me with no change in his expression. "Anoushka's least annoying roommate."

"My friends are not annoying," I say without thinking, definitely bolder than I'd ever act, especially considering the fact that I'm being surrounded by three predators, with another one just upstairs.

Not to mention that Nikolai is still in my space, watching me with that one narrowed manic eye of his.

"The blonde has a social butterfly complex and the silver-haired one is..." Jeremy trails off. "Bland to put it mildly. She's also teaching Anoushka bad habits. When I said annoying, I was being nice."

Seriously, what's with these wankers saying they're nice when they're exhibiting antisocial behavior?

Still, I keep my chin up. "Whether Ava chooses to be a social butterfly or not is her business. She didn't overstep your or anyone's boundaries by doing that, so you have no right to judge her. And Cecily isn't bland. She's the purest, most selfless soul to ever exist."

"A synonym for bland," he shoots back, and I'm ready to claw his eyes out.

And it's okay if I get myself killed in the meantime.

I might not care if insults are thrown my way, but I'd cut a bitch for my friends.

The moment I open my mouth to let whatever word vomit spill, Nikolai advances closer in front of me so that he's on the same step as me.

Any words I had to say die in my throat as I stare up at him. He's so tall, my neck almost snaps back from the angle. His bare chest nearly grazes mine and I can see the pores in his skin.

"I say, there are some similarities. Think I can draw a kitten by using another kitten?" He reaches an open palm to my face as if he intends to cover it and slam me against the nearest object.

Before I can try to duck, something hits Nikolai's forehead. His skull swings backward and he flies toward the ground.

He falls on his back with a loud, haunting thud, and the weapon of the crime, an American football, rolls beside him.

"And he scores," Jeremy says with unveiled amusement.

A sudden chill trickles down my spine, but I don't get the chance to look behind me.

I don't get a chance to move.

A larger-than-life presence appears by my side. I hate the warmth that accompanies the woodsy and amber scent. It's a smokescreen that there's a person beneath it all, when I've seen firsthand that that's not the case.

I catch a glimpse of his bare chest, the haunting tattoos, and the unnaturally bulging muscles. It's as if he's suppressing something.

Or maybe he's not bothering to camouflage his true nature.

But hey, at least he put on some pants.

I don't dare look at him, and instead, remain focused on Nikolai, who jumps up as if he wasn't knocked out.

"The actual fucking fuck, Satan's heir? What's with throwing motherfucking objects at me lately? Did you get fucking tired of living?"

Killian grabs me by the throat and I yelp as he pushes my back against the railing and captures my lips with his own.

Then he uses my bewilderment state to thrust his tongue inside. He dominates mine, makes me complete and utter putty in his hands.

I'm helpless, but I still try to fight. I put my hands on his chest to push him away, but that only causes his roughness to reach new, exhilarating levels.

His fingers spread on my neck and he kisses me with feverish control. He kisses like he's fucking me, like he's having his way with me again, and I have no choice but to take it.

But I'm not his plaything.

I bite his lip and he bites my tongue, harder, until a metallic taste explodes in my mouth.

Whether it's his or mine, I have no clue.

What I'm sure about is that the war of tongues, lips, and teeth only gets more potent with each passing second until I'm sure my head will explode.

His other hand wraps possessively around my hip and he slams me against the front of his body.

My curves are crushed by his ruthless harshness, and in hindsight, no amount of forts I could build would be able to resist the war that is Killian Carson.

He was always meant to break me to pieces and force me to enjoy every minute of it.

Maybe it's useless to fight.

Maybe I should've cut my losses at the beginning. Because obviously, my resistance is what got him interested in me in the first place.

Like an animal with sharp instincts, Killian must feel the dissipation of my fight, because he delves deeper, his tongue ravaging mine until I whimper from the fierce power.

His kiss is damnation in its purest form, and while I thought he wasn't what I wanted, maybe this monster is exactly what I need.

Once he feels like he driven his point home, Killian steps back, his lips leaving mine puffy, swollen, and definitely with a cut that burns.

Then he slowly unclasps his fingers from around my throat and tugs me to his side by a firm grip on my hip, making us face the others.

My face feels like a sauna as I realize the earlier show happened in front of his friends.

Shit.

Is it too late to dissolve into nothing?

Gareth's brows are creasing. Jeremy is smiling, and Nikolai's mouth is open.

"She's mine and, therefore, off-limits," Killian announces in a calm, threatening voice, staring between his brother and cousin. "Off-fucking-limits."

And then he throws me over his shoulder like a damn caveman and carries me back upstairs.

I push at his back as blood rushes to my head. "What are you doing? Let me down!"

"No can do. You obviously thought sneaking out of my bed like a fucking thief was a good idea and we have to prove otherwise."

I try to kick my legs in the air.

Slap.

I freeze as the sting registers in my arse. Did he just spank me?

My eyes widen, and I hang there, stupefied, as he kicks the door to his room open and throws me on the bed.

I don't focus on the soreness or the ache when I glare up at him. "You should pick up being a caveman as a hobby."

Killian kicks the door shut and advances toward me with a dark expression. "Shut the fuck up, Glyndon. You don't want to provoke me when I'm stopping myself from going back down there and murdering my own brother and cousin for getting so close to you."

I swallow, the gravity of the situation making my heart skyrocket. "You wouldn't, right?"

"You tell me since you're the one who thought it was a wonderful idea to flaunt yourself in front of them."

"I only wanted to leave."

"You don't get to leave when you're sleeping in my fucking arms, Glyndon. I let my guard down because you were with me, but I should've known better than to trust a conniving little rabbit. Maybe I'll chain you to me now. Put a bell around your fucking neck so I can hear you leaving. Or maybe a Taser so no one

touches you while I'm not there." He runs a hand through his hair. "Fuck. I'm going back, after all. Fucker Nikolai didn't bleed."

He turns around to leave and do what he promised.

And while I don't really care about Gareth or Nikolai, I don't want anyone's blood on my conscience.

Besides, this is what he looks like when his control is confiscated. It's the first time I've see him out of sorts and knowing I'm the reason fills me with a strange type of empowerment.

He's cold, calculating, allows no emotions in his armor, but he gave me this power over him.

Unintentionally, but it's there and I want it.

"Killian, wait," I whisper before I can think properly about my words.

He tilts his head in my direction with his hand on the doorknob.

I tap the mattress. "Let's go back to sleep."

He narrows his eyes. "What the fuck are you playing at now?"

"Nothing, I just want to sleep."

"You're more readable than a newspaper, and you want me to believe that you have no ulterior motive behind your unusual request?"

"No," I say it, and I believe it, too. "Please."

He watches me for a beat, his body still turned to the door, and I think he'll ignore me and proceed with whatever violence plot he has, but he releases the doorknob and stalks in my direction.

My heart nearly drops to my stomach as he removes his trousers and slides to my side, then pulls me atop of him.

"Leave again and I will fucking tie you to me," he whispers against my forehead.

"I won't," I murmur back and resist the urge to kiss his chest. What the hell?

It's just an unnatural reaction to the fact that he allowed himself to be stopped by me.

There's absolutely nothing more to it.

Right?

Killian's lips meet my forehead and I'm pretty sure something jostles in my heart when he murmurs, "That's my girl."

GLYNDON

"You'll be late anyway, so how about we go back to my very logical idea of staying in bed all day?"

I stare at Killian from my position in the passenger seat of his car. "Are you kidding?"

He taps his finger on the steering wheel. "It's strange how I rarely joke, but you choose to think that anyway. We need to work on your denial issues."

I roll my eyes and stare out the window.

"Did you just roll your eyes?"

"And what about it? We need to work on that, too?"

"Yes. That's an extremely juvenile gesture."

"Wow. Look at you being all proper. The queen is searching for her etiquette instructor."

"Doubt she needs one anymore."

"That was sarcasm."

"I know." He offers me one of his rare smiles. "I also know you use it when you're nervous. It's useless to keep worrying about being late to class since you will be anyway."

My lips part.

I'm well aware of his observational and emotion-reading skills, but I'm not ready to experience them over and over again.

"I'm not like you. I can't help but worry, genius. Also, Professor Skies already thinks I'm mediocre. I don't want to give him a reason to hate me more."

He taps his index finger against the steering wheel again. "Is this the same professor who encourages your being bullied?"

"He doesn't encourage the bullying..."

"But he doesn't stop it either," he finishes for me.

I don't speak, and he obviously takes it as confirmation.

There's an uncomfortable silence in the car, accentuated by the throbbing between my legs.

Earlier, I woke up with Killian's very hard cock nestled between my thighs.

He definitely intended to thrust inside me. When I told him I was still sore and probably wouldn't be able to move today, he said, "That's one more reason to stay in bed all day."

"Killian, no. I have classes. Not to mention, my friends must be worried sick about me."

"Killjoy."

"Does that mean you won't fuck me?"

"Depends. Will you put my cock in your mouth and suck me off like a dirty little slut?"

I swear my pussy throbbed at the easy way he says crude things like that, but I still cleared my throat. "What will I get in return?"

"Me not fucking you."

"No, I want something else."

"Look at you learning how to negotiate. Let's hear it. What do you want?"

"Let me think about it."

"Do it while you're on your knees, baby."

I ended up blowing him until my jaw hurt, then he made me swallow every last bit of his cum while looking down on me with that dark, seemingly calm lust.

He thrust two fingers in my mouth and fucked my tongue with the rest of his cum. "That's it. Swallow it all. Miss a drop and I might not be able to keep my promise about not fucking you."

Then he brought me breakfast in bed. No kidding. He's the one who fixed it, too, and he made me eat it all because, apparently, I'm shit at keeping up with my body's needs.

And now that I'm thinking about all that, a pulsating throb starts in my core and refuses to go away.

Killian retrieves a cigarette and stuffs it between his lips, then fishes for his Zippo.

I crunch my nose, "Didn't you say you'd quit if I kept your hands and lips occupied?"

I expect him to laugh it off, but he simply throws the cigarette out the window and opens his palm. "Hand."

Swallowing, I place mine in his.

A small smirk curls his mouth. "Now lips." When I hesitate, he glances at me. "You weren't so shy when you first kissed me last night."

"Ugh, shut up." I peck him on the lips and I hate how much I enjoy it. I hate how much I like the feel of his lips, how they open and suck and nibble. I hate the realization that I've never really enjoyed kissing until now.

When I feel like I'm getting too into it, I push back and clear my throat, desperate to change the subject. "Don't you have classes, too?"

"I don't have to attend them all, and I certainly don't have to worry about a professor putting me on his shit list."

"I bet they all think you're an exemplary student."

"*I am* an exemplary student. How do you think I got into med school?"

"By manipulating a poor soul or two?"

He chuckles, and he actually sounds amused and it's easy on the ears. Not like his usual sadistic laughs that are a manifestation of his devil side. "I can't manipulate my way into med school."

"You can cheat."

"Not really. It'll eventually catch up to me. Besides, I skipped two years. God level is hard to achieve."

"Your arrogance is staggering."

"Thanks."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"My genius neurons and I choose to take it as one."

I stop myself before I roll my eyes again and make him start an annoying lecture. "Is it really hard to be a genius?"

"It's effortless, actually. I don't have to think before acting. Everything comes naturally to me."

"Then why did you say God level is hard to achieve?"

"People usually relate better to hardships and they certainly react well to smokescreens, half-truths, and well-crafted lies."

"Not everyone."

"That's what you say now. Try being hit with a hard truth and see if you don't wish you never knew about it."

"I'd still seek the truth. Yes, it might hurt, but I'd find a way to come to terms with it. Being sad and struggling for a while is infinitely better than living a fake life."

"Words. Words."

"I mean every one of them."

"Hmm."

"What is 'hmm' supposed to mean?"

"Just hmm."

"Wow, thanks for the clarification."

"You're welcome."

"Were you born this annoying or did it come with time?"

"A little bit of both. Though my dad has annoying traits, so I might have the gene."

"Why am I not surprised that you bad-mouth your father?"

"I'm not bad-mouthing him. I'm just relaying a fact."

I stare at his unchanging expression. He doesn't seem bothered by talking about his father, and it's the first time he's spoken openly about his parents.

"I gather you have a strained relationship with your father?"

"And how, pray tell, did you gather that?"

"Earlier, you said Gareth is Daddy's golden boy, so that means you aren't. You also said he has annoying traits. Oh, and you never posted a picture of just the two of you on your Instagram."

"Stalker alert. Didn't know you went through all my posts, baby."

My cheeks burn. "That's not the point."

"Then what is?"

"Your relationship with your father."

"There's no relationship to speak of. He never liked the idea of me or the fact that I exist."

"Surely you read it wrong."

"There's nothing wrong with telling my mother that they should've stopped at my dear big bro—also spelled boring—because I'm defective."

A body shiver goes through me. Though Killian's tone remains the same, I can feel the change in his demeanor. The subject rubs him the wrong way, and I want to know more.

I want to sink my nails into the uncomfortable part of him and wrench it out because I know it's probably the only real him I'd ever see.

Now, I'm beginning to think that Killian has Gareth on his shit list because of his father.

The more Gareth is favored by their dad, the more he targets him.

Not that it's right, but it's a defense mechanism.

Like the way Lan becomes more insufferable the more Mum babies Bran.

"You must've gotten the wrong idea. Most parents don't hate their children."

"Keyword being most. Now, drop it."

"But—"

"I said. Drop. It."

The dark undertone leaves no room for negotiation, but before I can think of a way to circle back to the subject, he asks in his nonchalant voice, "Back to the topic at hand. Do I have your admiration?"

"For what?"

"For being a first-class genius."

My chest squeezes and I hate that I'm delighted that he wants my admiration.

I hate that it's the first thing that comes to mind.

"More like, you tried to cunningly get admiration. Sorry to break it to you, but you need to try harder."

A smirk lifts his lips. "Always up for a challenge."

"Is that what I am to you? A challenge?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

I groan. "You know that's not an answer. Are you doing it on purpose?"

He grins. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"Ugh. You're a bloody wanker."

"Ah. Don't. You know I get turned on by your foul mouth. Especially with that sexy little accent of yours."

I purse my lips, then glare at him, which only widens his grin.

We arrive in front of the dorm and he parks, then stares at me. "Okay, okay, I'll be nice and answer your question. You are a challenge, little rabbit. The worst of all, the most infuriating of all, but most importantly, the most entertaining of all."

My stomach sinks and a horrible, ugly feeling claws up my throat. It takes me a moment to try and breathe normally.

To try and not be affected.

To try and not let his words hold weight.

But it's useless. They've already grown roots and begun to ramify in chaotic patterns.

"Glad I could be your entertainment," I bite out.

"Lose the long face and the sarcasm. And who's the one who was preaching about always wanting the truth not two minutes ago? I could've lied to you, but I didn't."

When I remain silent, his voice darkens to an edge I've never heard before. "Do you want me to lie to you? Do you want me to wear a mask around you, pretend to be someone who'll be accepted by your pretty little morals, is that it, Glyndon? Because I can be your fucking Prince Charming, knight in shining armor, and dream fucking fantasy all rolled into one while I fuck up your life."

"I don't want anything from you." I open the car door and basically run inside.

He calls my name once, with an edge, but I ignore him, glad that the doorman won't let him in without a pass.

My heart is beating faster with each step I take. It's thumping, roaring, and pulsing in my ears in a creepy rhythm.

I have to lean against the wall for a beat to catch my breath.

Damn him.

And damn me for allowing him to have this type of effect on me.

Entertaining challenge.

Screw him.

I fish my phone out of my bra for the card I have there and pause at the number of notifications on the screen.

Ava: Where are u?

Cecily: Answer us.

Remi: Are you shagging? Yes or no. Or moan in a VM and we'll take it as a yes and leave you alone.

Annika: What are the possible reasons Creighton left me on Read the last...five times I texted him? A, he hates my guts. B, he's like that with everyone.

Annika: Please vote B. My pride is still bruised from when he said I talk too much. Do I talk too much?

Annika: I mean, I know I do, but not that much, right?

Annika: Where are you, Glyn? We're worried.

Bran: Call me when you see this.

I swipe the card and pause when a text swipes on my screen.

Lan: Where the fuck are you?

I swallow.

While Bran and I talk and meet up almost every day, Lan and I don't share the same relationship. It can only be bad news if he's searching for me.

"There she is!"

I startle at the entryway when I'm surrounded by three girls in their PJs, definitely waiting to ambush me.

There goes my plan to sneak in, change my clothes, take my books, and leave.

Walk of shame it is.

"Hi," I say with enough awkwardness to spur second-hand embarrassment.

"Don't hi us." Ava crowds my space, watching me with narrowed eyes. "You left us last night, and we barely slept, worried sick about you just to find out you were getting the D."

I choke on my spit. "W-what?"

"Are you okay?" Cecily strokes my arm.

"I don't know." I honest to shit mean it.

"I wouldn't know either with Kill. You could either be in for the roller coaster of your life or we'll find you in a ditch somewhere. No in-between." Annika gathers me in her arms. "Hugs. I'm here."

"Don't go consoling her." Ava wrenches Annika from me. "She has a lot of explaining to do."

"Can someone tell me what's going on?" I ask, seriously thinking I'm losing my mind.

"Check your Instagram," Cecily says quietly, almost apologetically.

I give them one last wry look, then tap the Instagram app. The first picture that shows up on my feed was posted an hour ago, and has over a hundred thousand likes and tens of thousands of comments.

My fingers shake as I watch the stilled picture.

It's when Killian kissed me against the stairs. His hand is around my throat, the other on my hip, and he's basically eating me for dinner. His bare chest is glued to mine and the way he's touching me is so possessive that it goes without saying what type of relationship we have.

An outsider would look at this and know that not only is Killian fucking me, but he's also so dominant and possessive of me that no one would dare come close.

He cemented it by the caption.

Off. Limits.

"No, he didn't," I whisper.

"He *so* did and also, also! He tagged you. That's how we saw it." Annika taps on the screen to show my account's name on the picture.

"Everyone could see this," I'm practically talking to myself. "Like everyone, including..."

I jump up when my phone lights up with a text.

Lan: Let's do it your way, little princess. Don't show your face near the fucker or I'll kill him.

KILLIAN

I give up on attending my classes for the day exactly two hours after I arrive at med school.

And yes, they're important and I should probably be present, put up with the general anxious atmosphere of my colleagues and the ego of professors who think they're special just because they're older and have some experience.

Thing is, I'm distracted as fuck. An emotion I haven't experienced...well, ever. I tend to be focused to a fault, methodical to the point of weeding out any need for impulsive action.

And yet, my systems, my patterns, and the very marrow of my life are being disturbed by a certain fucking rabbit.

I run a hand through my hair as I listen to the ringing for the dozenth time this morning.

When it goes to voicemail, I pull it from my ear and stare at it while tapping the back once, twice. Three times.

Maybe I should've chained her to me, after all, so I could choke the fuck out of her when she's being difficult for no reason.

"You're not coming?" Stella, a colleague with obvious fake red hair, asks on her way out of the school while carrying her white coat.

We're supposed to have a pathology class in the morgue, and that would usually be the highlight of my week—seeing inside dead people.

Not today, obviously.

"I have more important things to attend." I'm still staring at my phone and seriously contemplating if shaking it will force the one on the other end to finally pick the fuck up.

"How about later? I can give you the code to my dorm." A hand touches mine and that's enough to make me break my hyperfocus from the phone.

Stella grins, thinking getting my attention is a good thing.

The only smart one is Glyndon fucking King. She never wanted my attention. In fact, she tried everything under the sun to escape it.

She doesn't know this yet, but there'll be a day where she'll sprint in my direction, not the other way around.

"When did I give you permission to touch me?" I ask in a closed tone, not bothering to mask my true nature.

Stella, who I probably fucked once—and she's definitely forgettable if I did—startles and steps back. "I'm sorry, I just thought it was okay."

"You thought wrong." I step past her and head to the parking lot.

My feet come to a halt when I find someone leaning against the front of my car, legs crossed and his fingers toying with a key so close to the paint.

Not far from him stands a replica.

Landon and Brandon King.

Though their looks are identical—everything else isn't. Who I assume is Brandon dresses like a preppy boy with khaki pants and a polo shirt. His hair is styled, too, and he appears to be right out of a lacrosse team.

Landon's hair is messy, out of control, and he's in jeans and a denim jacket, not to mention that the look in his eyes is more dispassionate.

More...empty.

Probably as empty as mine.

Interesting.

"Nice ride," he says, still letting the key hover a few inches away as a form of a threat.

"Thanks," I reply nonchalantly. "It's special edition."

"Impressive," he says with no note of amazement whatsoever.

"I know."

"Then you should also know that I'll vandalize it and then your life if you don't stay away from my sister."

So this is about that Instagram picture. I figured it'd ruffle some people's feathers, but this is a lot faster than I thought.

"I'd love to help you with that, but what to do?" I show my good-boy smile. "You saw how much she was into it. I mean, me."

"That's not true." Brandon steps in my direction. "Glyn would never choose someone like you, so you must've coerced her in some way."

"Someone like me?" I tilt my head. "You mean a fourth-year med student at nineteen, heir to an empire, and a leader in one of the world's most prestigious colleges? Oh, and your sister's boyfriend."

"You are *not*," Brandon says.

"Denial is the first stage." I smile. "I'm sure you'll get to the acceptance stage eventually."

A slow clap makes me stare at Landon, who's grinning maniacally. "Bravo. I'm in fucking tears over your performance." His good humor vanishes along with his claps. "But I won't repeat myself another time. Let my sister go or I'll be inclined to take action against you, your leadership status, and your fucking little empire. Once I'm finished with you, you'll look in the mirror and not recognize yourself. Maybe then you'll realize that you shouldn't have messed with my family."

Hmm, interesting.

He has loyalty. No, not loyalty. A sense of ownership. He probably thinks of Glyndon and Brandon as his people—the property that when touched would reflect badly on his image.

"What if she wants to be with me?" I ask. "What are you going to do then?"

"Change her mind."

I grin. "I'm afraid I'm not the forgettable type."

"And neither am I."

We stare at each other, unblinking in a war of wits. No wonder Glyndon said her brother is like me. He is, but it's bothersome that he's against me right now.

What's the easiest way to make him accept me? I doubt any form of manipulation will work on him.

And he probably won't lose interest in this since he considers Glyndon under his protection.

"Just find someone else," Brandon says in a placating voice. "I'm sure you have endless choices at your disposal."

Landon realizes exactly where my focus shifts the moment his brother speaks. His key drops on the car and I grin.

Bingo.

He didn't want Brandon here. He thinks he's weak, probably too nice for his own good. He probably can't hold his own either.

Unlike my relationship with Gareth, Landon considers Brandon under his protection.

And just now, he knows that I'm going after him so he'll leave me and Glyndon alone.

"Brandon, right?" I give him the brightest, most fake smile I can conjure.

He nods, warily.

"Glyndon talks about you all the time, said you're her favorite brother." Not really, but she would've definitely gone for that angle if it were the case. And I'm hitting two birds with one stone.

Brandon will feel special. Landon will be rejected out of the favorite position. Not that I think he cares much about that, but it's a pride thing and we care about pride.

"She also said she wished you'd all get along better," I continue in an almost soothing voice, imitating Mom's tone when she talks to us. "It breaks her heart when you guys are fighting, and she wishes she could do more to be the bridge between you two."

Brandon's stance slowly relaxes and the corners of his eyes soften.

"Get it the fuck together," Landon bites out. "He's manipulating you, Bran."

"Why would I?" I still speak in the same tone. "I'm not asking anything from you, am I? I'm just relaying what Glyndon told me. I felt bad for her when she said that she was trapped between you two, which is why she prefers dinners at your grandfather's house instead of back home."

That's something I gathered from her Instagram. She has more pictures with her grandfather and grandmother than with her parents. She has more pictures with Bran than with Lan.

She has more pictures with her friends than with her brothers.

It's funny how people narrate their lives through their social media subconsciously. It's why I make my own narrative that no one can read behind.

Except for fucking Glyndon who put everything together about the absence of Dad from my Instagram, obviously.

Brandon's stance loses all the stiffness from earlier and the haunting sound of the key against the hood makes me pause. Not for long, though.

I knew Landon came with plans to scratch my car, and as much as I'm tempted to bash his head on the metal and fill the scratches with his blood, there are more important things at stake.

Such as Brandon's approval.

"Your brother obviously doesn't understand reason, but I'm sure you do." I step forward. "I'm on your and Glyn's side."

"Back the fuck off," Landon says while still vandalizing my car.

The garage will fix that. But only I can keep this leverage in the current situation.

"How do I know you're not using her?" Brandon asks a very logical question.

"If I were using her, I would've gotten bored within the first two days and let her go."

Which is true.

Fuck.

If I'm not using her, then what am I doing with her exactly?

People only fall into three categories for me.

Worth being used.

Not worth being used.

Neutral.

She's in none of the above.

But I'm sure she's in there somewhere, because she holds enough space to fuck up my day.

"That's not as reassuring as you were trying to make it sound," Bran says with a raised eyebrow.

"I could've lied, but I chose not to. Glyn said she likes my honesty." *Before she fucking ghosted me because of it.*

Brandon smiles a little, probably knowing how true that statement is, and it takes effort to hide my smirk as I stare back at the other brother.

Destroy my car all you want, but guess who's winning, Landon?

Not you.

Yes, Brandon may not come around right away, but he'll get there. Unless Glyndon runs her mouth and ruins it.

But even if she does, I'll start from scratch to earn the nice brother's approval.

All the effort I'm making for this fucking rabbit is starting to piss me off, but still, it's entertaining.

I'm about to push a little further, just because I can, but a tiny figure approaches us in moderate steps, completely oblivious to the tension in the air.

Her blonde hair is gathered in a long ponytail with a fuck ton of ribbons that match the ones on her black dress, boots, and bag.

She's like a fucking Goth Barbie, sans the black hair, and a creepy 2.0 version of Mom and Aunt Rai.

Oh, and this is about the worst timing to come find me.

My cousin Mia, who's a year younger than me, holds a container of food and smiles at me, brightly, and I know not to take that shit for granted.

I know I'm one of the few people she smiles at.

Her steps come to a halt when she sees what Landon has done to my car and stares at him with a furrowed brow, then at the key in his hand, then at the map of horror on the red paint.

Be ready for your ride to be thrown off a ditch, motherfucker.

She puts the strap of the food container over her shoulder, letting it hang on her side, and signs, "Why did this fucking tool ruin your car and why is he still breathing?"

I smirk. *Good question, cousin.*

The answer is something I don't even want to admit to myself, though.

I'd probably be blacklisted from Glyn's life if I hurt her brother—even if he is a slimy motherfucker. But that doesn't mean I won't make this asshole's life miserable.

"And now, we have a mute in our ranks." Landon smiles, knowing full well that this changes the balance of power from earlier. "Brilliant."

"Lan, stop it," Bran warns.

"Call her a mute again and I'll skin you alive," I say with enough menace to make my vision go red.

Mia is the only person on earth who's told me, or more like signed to me, that "It's okay to be different, Kill. I still love you."

And I would murder for her. No questions asked.

"What's wrong with calling a mute a mute?" Landon continues smiling, having already forgotten about scratching my paint. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind."

"Tell him I don't mind one bit and I'm also sure he wouldn't mind this," Mia signs to me, then flips him both her middle fingers while smiling sweetly.

He narrows his eyes, his humor vanishing. Brandon smiles and turns to me, "Please apologize to her on my brother's behalf."

"She can hear you," I say. "She just doesn't speak."

She signs to me and I tell Brandon, "She said not to apologize on behalf of, and I quote, 'a motherfucking tool, who's polluting the air with his breath,' because you're not responsible for his actions."

"You're right." He offers her his hand. "I'm Brandon."

She shakes it and looks at me.

"Mia," I say. "My cousin."

They smile at each other, already seeming to get along. I haven't thought about this before, but it's another opportunity to get Brandon on my side regarding his sister.

I owe you one, Mia.

Note to self, buy her more ribbons.

"How do you curse in sign language?" Landon asks, probably to be a dick, because he can't handle how everyone in this scene is now against him.

She flips him off again while smiling.

"Like that," I supply for her, and Brandon does a failure of a job in hiding his smile.

"Let's go eat," she signs, completely ignoring him. "I made you pancakes. I tried finding Nikolai, but that dork is MIA. And Maya was like 'Bitch, get out before I stab you.' In fucking capital letters. That shit becomes mental when her sleeping time is interrupted, and I'm looking for therapy for her issues. It happens on Tuesdays if you're interested in joining. Oh, and Gareth isn't answering my texts, and I'm so gonna tell Aunt Reina he's ghosting me."

"So I'm your last choice?" I raise a brow.

She laughs like a little hellion, then hits my shoulder and signs, "You know you're my favorite."

"Uh-huh."

"Tell Brandon to come along," she signs. "He's obviously the nice twin."

"She's inviting you to eat with us." I motion at Brandon, and he surprisingly nods and walks toward us.

Good. I can ask him questions about his difficult sister who's still not answering me.

I swear to fuck, I'm going to put a tracker on her phone next time I see her.

"You have seven days to cut ties with Glyndon or we'll do it my way," Landon announces, accentuating his words with one last scratch to my car before he stalks in the other direction.

"Let me go get him, Kill," Mia signs. "I'll bite his head off."

"What the fuck? You're not a dog." I laugh, then say more seriously, "Stay out of this. I mean it. This is my fight and I don't want you in the middle."

She pouts, but then she releases a sigh and nods.

Brandon rubs the back of his head. "You should probably take his threat seriously."

"Nah, he doesn't scare me."

"He should. Don't underestimate him."

"Oh, I won't. I also won't let him put his nose where it doesn't fucking belong." I smile. "Now, who wants some pancakes?"

The little rabbit can ghost me all she wants. She refuses to talk to me? Fine.

But I'll make sure she's the one who comes running, not the other way around.

GLYNDON

Today is just not my day.

Not only did the girls grill me about all the Killian drama, but I also got an earful from Professor Skies due to being late. The icing on the cake was bumping into a glass door after class.

In my defense, the last one happened because of all the people who kept watching me as if I were an exotic animal.

Attention isn't my scene, but that wanker went ahead and put me at the forefront of everyone's mind.

They wouldn't stop talking about me behind my back, whispering, and murmuring, and making my anxiety shoot up.

I contemplated hiding in the bathroom for a bit, but then I thought that I don't really owe people anything and shouldn't be feeling ashamed about that kiss.

Yes, the bastard is at the top of my shit list, but that doesn't mean I have to feel any form of shame.

So I held my head high, barely, finished my classes, and then went to the art studio.

We were supposed to paint a nude today, with one model for about fifteen students, but I realized halfway through that the features and the body lines on my canvas weren't the model's.

Far from it.

My sense of eroticism drove me to the nightmare I've been trying, and failing, to escape every time.

It made me put rough strokes around intense eyes and recreate every cut in his abdomen, hauntingly broken crows, and

even the slight freckles on the top of his shoulders.

I need help.

When my colleagues take a break to smoke, I use the chance to check my phone.

I'm fully intent on ignoring Killian's calls for the sole reason that I need time for me and myself.

But then I find a text from him.

Psycho: Run all you want. I'll just occupy myself with...

Attached is a picture of my brother eating from a plate, his head down, so I can't see his expression.

My heart skips a beat.

Please don't tell me he coerced or threatened Bran with something?

I don't think about it as I slip out of my painting jumpsuit, grab my bag, and drive all the way to the Heathens' compound.

Judging from that picture and the wallpaper behind them, they must be somewhere in the mansion.

I stop the car in front of the closed gate.

In my haste to come here, I forgot that this is a private property—a guarded property with enough security to put the queen's royal guards to shame.

The other two times I came here, during the initiation and last night's party, it was open to all. Well, not all, but the guards didn't stop me.

Before I can think of a believable lie to grant myself access, the giant gate opens with a haunting creak.

My hands sweat on the steering wheel, but I choose to take the opportunity and drive inside. I can think about everything else after I make sure Brandon is safe and outside that snake's reach.

I tried calling and texting both Killian and Bran, but there was no reply. Oh, and the psycho left me on Read.

Once I get to the mansion, I find the front door open as well. This time, I search my surroundings for possible guards.

The gothic air of the house, mixed with emptiness and silence, fills me with a creepy vibe that I can't put my finger on.

A swish of air throws my hair in my eyes and I swear a shadow creeps up behind me.

Or maybe I'm just paranoid.

I quicken my steps inside, choosing to focus on my mission instead.

I'm not one step up the stairs when I hear a scream from a room downstairs.

My hand shakes and I rub it on my shorts as I slowly head in the direction of the sound.

Please don't tell me I'm too late.

Again.

A sob catches in my throat and it remains there, stealing my ability to breathe properly.

I push the huge double doors open, half-shaking, half-nauseated.

Not again, please—

My thoughts come to a halt when the scene unfolds. I don't know why I expected to find some torture chamber, but what's in front of me is far from it.

In fact, it's...a game room.

Gold-and-red wallpaper covers the space and a red carpet spills on the ground with the density of blood. Huge screens occupy most of the walls, all complete with red LED lights. An elegant billiard table sits in the middle, and some board games are set up in the corners.

The reason behind the noise is from the screens.

"Give it up already," Killian says from his position on luxurious dark red leather chair while clutching a gaming controller.

He's speaking to a girl who's sitting cross-legged on her own huge chair and tapping manically on her controller. Her lips are pursed and her fair skin is red.

"Don't listen to him. You can win," Bran says, sitting on the armrest of her chair.

My breath comes out in a slow whoosh.

He's fine. I'm not late. He looks okay and he's...smiling.

My quiet brother, who's more asocial than me, seems to be having fun.

Now that the immediate danger is out of the way, I focus on the scene in front of me.

Are they seriously playing games when I've been worried sick?

Also, who's the girl? From my side-glance, she seems familiar, but I'm not sure where I've seen her.

Why is my brother bonding with her and Killian? *Might as well stab me in the back, Bran.*

Not that I'm jealous.

I refuse to believe I'm jealous.

"Don't go giving her false hope." Killian presses his buttons with the same speed as the girl, but he's completely nonchalant about it, appearing bored while still efficient. "And believe me, baby Sokolov, he's only rooting for you because he'd rather play the final against you and win."

I take a step inside and I swear he catches me in his peripheral vision. His speed slows down a little and then the girl jumps up, hitting her controller over and over.

Then she laughs and hugs Bran.

"I knew you could do it," Bran says as they break apart.

She jerks her chin in Killian's direction and signs.

Oh. She can't speak.

Now I feel like a horrible person for having a tiny grudge against her earlier.

"She says you're the best cheerleader ever."

My brother grins. "Not sure if I should be honored or feel disturbed."

Killian lifts a shoulder. "Probably both."

Suddenly, his eyes meet mine. They're harsh and dark and have nothing of the earlier nonchalance he sported when he was playing.

For some reason, I think he lost on purpose just now. Bran and the girl probably didn't notice, but I saw how Killian intentionally slowed down to let her have the upper hand.

He's still lounging on the chair, but his spine has straightened and there's that brimming tension in his blank expression, a storm that's been slowly but steadily building—definitely not good news.

But you know what? Fuck him.

I'm the one who's supposed to be angry for all the shit he's done since this morning.

"Bran." I slide to my brother's side and touch his arm. "Are you okay?"

"Oh, hey, little princess. Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?" He motions at the girl, who's watching me closely. "Meet Mia, Killian's cousin and my new gaming master."

She nods enthusiastically, her features making her look so young, way younger than me. Countless ribbons decorate her hair, dress, wrists, and even her giant boots. She gets A+ for the fashion sense.

Now, I feel completely stupid for thinking she's a romantic interest. I knew I'd seen her somewhere—she was in some pictures with Nikolai.

After watching me for a beat, Mia signs to Killian.

"What did she say?" I ask him without fully looking at him, because I'm just not ready to face the devil right now.

"She's asking me whether or not you're mean like your tool of a brother, Landon."

"She...she met him?" My voice shakes and Bran holds my arm.

Killian narrows his eyes. "Earlier, when he showed up at *my* school, vandalized *my* car, and threatened me to break up with you or else he'll do worse."

Yup, sounds like my brother.

Mia signs to Killian again and he translates, "She says Landon is the biggest tool she's met in years and that says something since she's used to seeing all shapes of tools. Oh, and it's a shame that he shares looks with such a sweetheart like Bran. If it weren't for that, she would cut his face while he sleeps."

Bran laughs loudly, genuinely, and I smile, too. This girl isn't afraid of Lan. I like that.

"Meet Glyn, Mia," Bran says, holding my shoulder. "She's definitely more like me than Lan."

"Nice to meet you," Killian translates, the rumble of his voice next to my ear, then lowers until only I can hear him. "You should treat my cousin—as in, me—well."

I glare at him. "Are you sure she said that last part?"

"She would if she could."

"Let's go back, Bran." I grab his arm and try to get out of the situation before it becomes muddier.

"Mia and I have the finals now. Just wait a bit."

"But—"

Mia shakes her head at me with pure determination, grabs her controller, and tosses the other to Bran.

He catches it and looks at me. "We can go if you're not feeling well."

I do want to leave, but if I say that, then I'll just ruin the whole mood.

"Are you okay?" Bran watches me closely.

"Yeah."

"You sure? Because you have a lot of explaining to do, little princess."

I wince. "I know. We'll talk later. Go on and finish your game."

It's been such a long time since I've seen Brandon enjoying himself without feeling so...sad.

Mia signs something to Killian and he stares at her blankly. "I'm not saying that."

Her brow furrows and she signs again, angrily this time.

"What?" I ask.

"She says your accents are hot, and fuck you, too, baby Sokolov." He stalks to my brother's side. "Guess I'm rooting for Bran this round."

Since when does he call my brother Bran? And how are they so close when they barely hung out today?

Though maybe I'm underestimating Killian's ability to charm people.

"I'll be right back," I announce, though I'm not sure any of them hears since the video game is loud and they're arguing.

One more reason why I chose this opportunity to slip away.

I'll hide in the loo until Bran is finished with his game and we can leave.

My steps quicken to the guest bathroom on the lower level, which is next to the game room.

Steps sound behind me and a sudden chill goes down my spine.

"If you run, I'll chase you." Killian's dark voice permeates the air with the thickness of smoke. "And if I chase you, I'll catch you." His voice gets nearer. "And if I catch you, I'll fuck you, baby."

I don't allow myself to think about it as I run the short distance to the bathroom and slam the door shut with all my might.

But a hand slips through like in a horror film, complete with the scare and the terrified yelp.

I try to push the door shut, but my effort doesn't compare to his brute strength.

To the power behind it.

To the twisted intent coating it.

I'm physically flung back when he bangs the door open, appearing nonchalant, effortless, as if he found no trouble eliminating an obstacle that's in his way.

Which I honestly think he didn't.

He stalks inside the bathroom, letting the door close with haunting slowness.

I'm trapped with a monster.

One with beautifully cruel features, a sinful physique, and no mask.

He won't even pretend he'll take it easy on me now, will he? No promises of *I won't hurt you much*, or *I won't fuck you if you suck me off*.

This is him uncut.

I wish it was merely a scarface, that if I tried to peel it off, it'd collapse. But it's his true face. No scars to uncover, and no alternate reality to find.

And I need out of his reach.

Now.

I turn to the toilet's door; my last resort is to lock myself in there.

Two steps are all I take before I'm wrenched back by a merciless grip on my hair.

I shriek, but the sound is muffled by a harsh hand on my mouth as my back hits his chest.

"Shhh." His lips brush against my ear, so sinful and dark that my stomach drops. "You don't want your brother to come in and see his sister getting fucked raw, do you?"

I shake my head frantically, but it's not to agree with him. It's so he'll stop this fucked-up charade.

"What was it he called you?" His voice sounds casual, but it's anything but. It's lava spilling from a volcano. A hurricane that's flipping the ocean inside out. "Right, little princess. Think he'll still feel that way when he witnesses his baby sis all fucked up with my cum?"

My core clenches and I try to push away from him, but the more I do, the tighter his grip turns on my hair. It's downright painful and tears spring to my eyes.

"Bet you're wet like a dirty little slut." He effortlessly pushes down my shorts so they pool around my ankles and slips a ruthless hand inside my underwear, cupping me. "I knew you'd be soaking for me, baby. You like being manhandled till you can't breathe. You like how I confiscate your will. It turns you the fuck on, doesn't it? Admit it, you don't like my nice side. You're a fucking whore for my devil side."

I shriek a "No," but it comes out like a haunted sound against his hand. It comes out like a big fat lie that I don't know if I'm believing anymore.

Killian pushes my underwear aside and thrust three fingers in at the same time. My eyes roll back from the ruthless force and the pleasure that pulsates through my core. The fact that he's muffling my voice and my breaths is making this even more demented.

Erotically sinful.

Killian uses his hold on my mouth to push my head down. "Look at how your cunt is thrilled with my fingers. You wanted me to find you and pin you down and force you to come. You wanted me to make your little pussy sorer so you feel my cock with every step. You want *me*, baby."

I shake my head over and over.

He merely shrugs. "It's up to you whether you believe it or not, and it's up to me to fuck my cunt whenever I want. See how you're dripping all over my hand, you dirty slut?"

He makes me watch the in and out of his fingers and my embarrassing arousal. He makes me see every move, every depravity, adding more edge to the act.

"That's it, swallow them up." He adds a fourth finger, stuffing it against the others, and I honestly think he'll tear me or

something. "Relax, you took my cock, you can handle this much."

He pounds them into me at the same time, scissoring, interlinking, deepening them.

My eyes droop and for a moment, I honestly believe I'm going insane from the onslaught of pleasure.

"Think I can fit my whole first in there?" he whispers with dark lust, and my eyes shoot open as I turn my head to shake it.

He merely chuckles. "Don't faint on me, little rabbit. I still have a lot to punish you for." He flicks his thumb against my clit, making me see stars instantly.

It's embarrassing how fast I come from the clit stimulation.

"You didn't deserve that orgasm after the stunts you pulled today." He wrenches his fingers out of me and I refuse to recognize the emptiness that takes hold of me.

I refuse to recognize the need for more pulsing inside me.

"If you scream or call for help, I'll make your brother watch you getting fucked. Do you hear me?"

Bitter tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to let them loose as he releases my mouth but fists my hair.

"Fuck you," I spit out.

"That foul mouth only gets my cock hard, baby. So if you have any more insults to get off your chest, by all means."

"You're the one who pulled the stunts first by posting that picture."

"The world needed to know you're mine. I won't apologize for that. In fact, I'd do it again and earlier so no one would entertain the idea of having you."

"Let me guess, because only you can?"

"You guessed correctly."

"I'll never, ever choose to be with you."

"News flash. You already are."

"Not by choice."

"Don't fucking care." He tugs on my hair. "And you're pushing it. Your pussy will pay the price for that."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You don't like being told hard truths?"

"You're the one who doesn't. You were pissed off even before you found out about the picture because I told you facts your little moral compass doesn't approve of." He shoves me down against

the counter and I buck, but he pins me in place by the nape, so I have no choice but to hold on to the edge of the marble. "But here's the thing, I'm not going to lie to protect your fragile little emotions. What's so fucking special about emotions anyway? You think you're great because you have them? Here's the thing, you see me and you'll continue to fucking see me, Glyndon. Empty shell, devil side, and all."

He's mad. No, probably enraged.

I've started to notice that he only calls me by my name when he's angry.

The sound of his zipper echoes in the bathroom, followed by a slap on my arse cheek. I yelp, but it's drowned by a moan when he enters me from behind.

I'm supposed to be sore, but the moment he's fully sheathed inside me, I let out a small whimper.

"Fuck, I'll never get tired of this," he murmurs with obvious lust, then thrusts inside me with the rhythm of a madman.

I want the earth to open up and swallow me rather than feel the onslaught of both pleasure and pain.

All of a sudden, he tugs my head up by the hair and makes me stare at the stranger in the mirror.

Killian is behind me, tall like a god and sinister like the devil. His face is hard, his features dark with both lust and domination.

And me?

I'm bent over, being used and abused and utterly dominated by him, but instead of pain, my eyes shine with erotic pleasure. My lips are parted, and my nostrils are flaring.

His hold on my hair makes the scene even more disturbing. Wrong.

Carnal.

"Look at how much you want this, baby. You're about to cry for it." He slows his rhythm but deepens it until my hip bone hits the edge of the counter. "Next time, you don't question that you're mine, you don't go around ghosting me for it, and you sure as fucking fuck do not push me away. Is that clear?"

I dig my nails into the marble, feeling every stroke, every burst of pleasure inside.

His teeth meet the flesh of my throat and he bites down, so hard that I shriek.

"Is that fucking clear, Glyndon?"

"No..." I glare at him in the mirror and he bites the spot next to it.

A sob leaves me this time, but the onslaught of pain adds to the friction his cock causes.

"We'll try again. Is that fucking clear?"

"I don't want to be yours."

"Not your call to make."

"I don't want to lose myself," I admit, tears gathering in my cheeks.

"You won't."

"How would I know? You're getting your way with me."

"It's up to you whether I punish you and you don't enjoy it or I actually bring you pleasure." He rolls his hips and hits a spot inside me that whitens my vision for a brief second. "Say you're mine, baby."

I purse my lips, but the fight in me is long gone. I still murmur. "I'll never be yours."

"Terrible fucking mistake." His rhythm turns berserker and it's intense, so intense that I cry.

So intense that I wish I could die and orgasm at the same time.

But he makes me come again and again, demanding that I say the words.

I don't.

He could kill me and I fucking wouldn't.

This is the last part I have of myself, and I vehemently refuse to hand it over.

He said he wouldn't lie to me.

I will.

Until he finally lets me go.

GLYNDON

I never knew life could be this hectic, absolutely foreign, and downright...surreal.

It's been a week since Killian fucked me against the bathroom counter—or more like *punished* me.

He's been punishing me ever since.

Yes, he lets me come, even goes as far as making me beg for an orgasm, and while he takes pleasure in satisfying me, he also likes proving his domination and the fact that he holds all the cards.

He picks me up and throws me down, with his fingers on my throat and his cock wreaking havoc inside me. He bites and slaps and leaves all sorts of hickeys and bruises, especially where everyone can see.

He makes it his mission to be touching me somehow in public, whether with his arm around my waist or shoulder, or my hand tucked in his. Anything that will let the world know that I belong to him.

That no one dares to 'look at what's his,' as he so eloquently told me.

Unlike what I predicted, however, he hasn't tried to force my friends to accept him. Instead, he's used a manipulative approach like the way he got Bran to his side.

He's barged into our circle, without so much as asking for permission, and sits with us for lunch—that he makes for me every day now. He indulges in everyone's interests and has made them slowly come out of their shells and accept him.

Never once has he used violence or threatened them—that's obviously just reserved for me.

As for their reactions, they differ. Ava is all for me getting laid, Cecily still doesn't trust him, Annika seems like she feels sorry for me more than anything, Remi kind of found out about it last and became adorably dramatic, and Creighton just doesn't care.

When I told Killian that Remi is like the funniest ever, he didn't appear amused.

If I thought Killian was overbearing before, I've come to learn that he's nothing short of a dictator. Not only does he want all his orders met, but he also has zero tolerance for opposition.

The more I say no, the more ruthless he becomes. The harder I fight, the more severe my 'punishment' is. And that can happen anytime, anywhere. Whether it's in his car—that he got fixed in record time—his room, my room—after he sneaks in from the balcony—or at the firefly lake, that's sort of become our meeting spot.

Bottom line is, I'm getting trapped deeper into the web he's been customizing for me and I'm not sure of the way out.

Do I even want a way out?

Killian is not totally a devil and can actually be nice. He prepares all my meals, and makes sure I eat my food and drink my water—he totally sounded like a doctor when he ordered that.

The other day, I caught him watching *Inception* and he said he wanted to see it again and imagine me watching it for the first time. Totally didn't like it when I said Leonardo DiCaprio is my celebrity crush, though.

Anyway, he shows interest in my interests, has subscribed to a shit ton of art magazines and bought me a premium palette just because he felt like it.

Then he told me to paint him fucking me with it, the bastard.

As if that's not enough, he always makes me talk about my art, my friends, and my family. He even chooses to do it when my guard is down, after sex, because he knows I become more open then.

Slowly but surely, he's getting under my skin to the point I don't know if it's a good or a bad thing.

This week has been bubbling with a sense of...freedom. Yes, it's the scary type—the type where I have to be held down and made helpless to be able to come, but it's freedom all the same.

It's the first time I've felt like I could let go and not overthink it, have panic attacks about it, or look at myself in the mirror and be disgusted.

The last part is highly due to the fact that Killian often fucks me in front of a mirror and makes me see my pleasure-filled face. He makes me call his name, too. Over and over, until it becomes a hoarse chant.

But he still can't make me admit that I'm his, something that enrages him every time, and then he shows me exactly how much it angers him.

But screw him.

I'm keeping that last piece of myself even if I die trying. It might be a useless pride thing, but I know, I just know that if I give up that part, I have to be fully ready to accept being completely controlled by him.

That one day, I'll wake up and not recognize myself, because I'd be molded into his little fucktoy.

And that's just not me.

So my fight isn't a useless manifestation of my ego. It's my only survival mode.

Walking to class, I check the texts I got this morning.

Gareth: The footage I sent last time was the only one we have of Devlin. The last one who saw him alive aside from you was the red mask, and I'm sure you know who that is.

My fingers shake as I read and re-read the text.

Over the past couple of days, Gareth has kept his part of the bargain and sent me surveillance footage clips of Devlin going into their mansion exactly one night before his death. And the footage Gareth was talking about just now is a video where Devlin was ushered into the basement by one of the creepy bunnies. The one who was waiting for him there was the red mask.

Killian.

Then the video ended.

During the initiation, I heard the participants mention that the last one was about mind games. And there's no one better at

those than Killian.

But why did Devlin decide to drive his car off the cliff right afterward?

The only one who can answer that question is probably Killian, but whenever I want something from him lately, he'll be all like, "Say you're mine first."

When I refuse, he shrugs and leaves me hanging.

This will be no different. In fact, he'll probably be a dick just because he can.

I tuck my phone and thoughts away as I step into Professor Skies's class. I'm ready for him to roast me for being fifteen seconds late, but he merely gives me a look and says nothing.

Wait. He's letting it go?

My movements are slow and awkward at best as I take a seat at the back of the class, thankful to be hidden by my canvas.

That's when I realize the painting I did last time is missing, and in its place, there's a blank one.

And then, something completely out of left field happens. Professor Skies pulls out a painting, and not just any painting—*my* painting—and showcases it to the whole class.

My ears heat, ready for the onslaught of his words, this time to embarrass me in front of the whole class.

But I can't look away from the black and red shadows intertwining, clashing, and slamming into each other like forces of nature. I'm proud of that painting, of my state of mind when I put it together, but now, the professor will downright humiliate me again.

Maybe I should run before the roasting starts.

No. I'm a big girl. I can take it.

"The blend of cold, gloomy, dark, flat, and absolutely exaggerated impressionist style can manifest in different ways." He motions at the painting. "This is one of them. Definitely not the best, or the first, but it has a unique style that's worth studying for emotive value. Well done, Miss King."

The whole class's attention slides to me, but the best I can do is stare incredulously as if I'm having a stroke.

Maybe I *am* having a stroke.

If this is a dream, it's too cruel. Wake me up, please.

I pinch my thigh and it sure as hell hurts.

"Moving on," the professor announces and talks about today's lesson while keeping the painting there.

My painting.

I'm still dazed long after the class ends. I honestly expect him to call me up front and tell me it was all a distasteful joke, but he just leaves.

And so does everyone else.

Only Stuart stays behind and smiles at me, a bit awkwardly. He's been taking Killian's threats seriously and keeps enough distance between us to fit three other people.

"Congrats, Glyn. It's long overdue."

"Thanks...I guess...I'm still unable to believe it. You know how much he hates me and thinks my art is rubbish and a poor imitation of my mum's. He even said I'm not worth being her daughter and Landon's sister."

Stuart rubs the blond strands at his nape. "He can be a snob."

"Can be?"

"Well, he is, but hey, look at the bright side. He finally sees your worth." He grins. "If it means anything, I think your art is more provocative than your mum's and even Landon's. I like it."

"Thanks." I can't help the smile that breaks on my lips.

It's the first time someone has told me that, aside from my mum. She tried to dull my insecurities early on, but she's my mother. She's inclined to treat her children the same, but I think, deep down, she loves Bran the most and she definitely thinks Landon is an artistic genius that even surpasses her.

Something she's proud of.

Stuart and I head to the cafeteria to pour caffeine into our systems, but we're stopped in the hall by a very familiar, very blonde, very colorful, à la Harley Quinn style, girl.

Cherry pops bubble gum in my face, watching me like I'm nothing more than the dirt on her shoe.

She's been roaming around the restaurants and parks I go to lately, probably keeping an eye on me or something.

This is the first time she's gotten close, and to say I'm not comfortable in her presence would be an understatement.

"Do you need something?" I ask in my neutral tone.

I've been in a good mood all morning and she ruined it in a fraction of a second.

"Shoo, nerd," she dismisses Stuart. "The grown-ups need to talk."

"Maybe you're the one who needs to shoo until you grow some manners," I tell her.

"It's okay... I'll be in the cafeteria." Stuart basically flees the scene, leaving me alone with Cherry.

As in, the girl Killian fucked for a long time and who obviously liked it enough to come back for more.

No. I'm simply not going to think about that detail.

"Ugh, the more I look at you, the surer I am that you're more boring than your country's weather, you lack personality, and you're probably as prude as a nun. What the fuck does Killer see in you?"

"Obviously what he doesn't see in you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have better things to do than indulge in petty boy drama. This is not secondary school, last I checked."

"Listen here, you little snobbish bitch." She gets in my face, her voice hardening. "You think you're special? Think you're the only one Killer has made feel like a queen before he tossed them aside like a used condom? Been there, done that, have the fucking marks to prove it. So gloat while you can, because he'll be done with you soon, and when that happens, he'll come back to my bed, because he knows that's where he belongs. With someone like me, not a stupid fucking neurotypical bitch like you."

I can feel the blood rushing to my face, but I force myself to remain calm, because I know that's what will get on her nerves the most. "Are you done?"

"No," she snarls. "If you don't stay away from him, you'll get yourself killed. Consider that the first and only warning I'll ever give you."

"Let me guess, you'll kill me?"

"No, *he* will. Did you know that Killer has been repressing his bloodlust and murder instinct since he was in his early teens? Of course you didn't, because you're fucking normal. You don't relate to his true self, so in order to placate your stupid-ass little morals, he'll keep on repressing and repressing, and fucking repressing.

And do you know who the first victims of serial killers usually are? Their lovers, wives, and mothers, as in, the people who made them repress in the first place. Last I checked, that's you."

Her words drill a hole in my chest and it takes me more effort than needed to breathe properly and even more to talk. "Last I checked, I don't believe your words."

"Go ahead and ask him then." Her voice turns sinister. "Why do you think his favorite color is red? It's the color of blood."

I swallow and she laughs like a maniac. "What a scaredy-cat. You have the chance to walk away. Take it."

"He won't let me," I say without meaning to.

"Hurt him by choosing someone else and he won't touch you again." She taps my temple. "Use your head and admit that you're a good girl who's not fit for him. He needs someone bad to the core to match his energy."

Her words keep playing in my head on a loop long after she's gone. I mull them over during classes, during lunch—that Killian sent me with Annika because he has classes—in the afternoon while I'm trying to concentrate in the studio.

Even when I FaceTime Grandpa and my parents. I totally had to cut those short, because they'd definitely know there's something wrong with me.

Once I finish, I go on a drive and somehow end up in front of his house.

I let my head fall on the steering wheel as I breathe harshly. What the hell am I doing?

We were supposed to meet later for dinner, but I came two hours early.

I'm never early. In fact, I make sure to come late, just to get on his nerves. It's my rebellion against the dictator.

Though I don't come so late that he decides to be the one to pick me up, because that definitely means he'll fuck me in the car first.

I consider leaving for now, but the gate opens. Apparently, I have automatic access to the mansion now along with the four founding members and the fifth one I've never met.

Once I reach the inside, I hear a commotion coming from the pool.

I head that way, and sure enough, Nikolai attempts to push Gareth into the pool and Jeremy is trying to mediate so he doesn't drown him.

"Fucker thinks he can stay all prim and proper after waking me up from my fucking slumber. Get ready to have your corpse sent back home by international fast shipping."

Nikolai kicks his cousin and Gareth grabs him at the last minute. A water bomb erupts and splashes water all over the edges, soaking a fully-clothed Jeremy.

"You fuckers tired of living?" He glares at them and Nikolai merely splashes him.

"Stop being boring. Even Satan's heir is here instead of chasing after skirt."

Killian is lying on a lounge chair wearing black shorts and an open shirt that reveals hints of his taut chest, muscular stomach, and some of his crow tattoos. He pays the scene no attention, looking straight through them.

His gaze is lost in the distance, half-thoughtful, half...gone.

I wonder what he's thinking about at moments like these. What goes on in his abnormal mind?

His head tilts in my direction as if he knew I was there all along. And just like that, a smirk breaks his lips.

Killian's smirks are different from his smiles. The latter are usually fake. His lazy smirks, however, are playful, mischievous, and a sight to behold.

It makes butterflies slash my stomach with the sole purpose of bleeding me out.

"Glyndon!" Nikolai shouts from the pool. "Tell me you brought your swimsuit."

I walk to Killian. "I actually didn't."

"That's okay. We can all go nude." He waggles his brows.

"Not if you want it to be your last nude show," Killian tells him with a dark tone.

"He's become more boring than hookers, I swear." Nikolai is about to splash him, but Gareth jumps him, drowning him underwater, then nods in my direction.

I've become used to these guys, though I really stay away when Nikolai is in his murder-spree mood or when Jeremy's voice

changes.

But no matter how much I'm used to them, they're still Heathens and could and would turn lethal.

A strong hand wraps around my wrist and brings me down on a hard surface. I release a surprised sound when I drop on Killian's lap. He releases my wrist and wraps a possessive hand around my waist.

Chill-inducing warmth covers my skin. It's weird how someone so cold can give this feeling of...peace.

"Is it just me or are you here early?"

"I was around, so I figured I would come." I stare back at the guys. "Didn't know I would be in for a pool show."

His fingers tilt my chin and make me face him. "Eyes on me if you don't want to be in for a bloodbath instead."

I swallow, Cherry's earlier words stabbing me all at once.

"I'm assuming that's not an empty threat and you're actually contemplating murder."

"You assume correctly."

A ball the size of my fist gathers in my throat. "Do you really want to kill?"

He raises a brow. "Do you *really* want to know or will you ghost me again if I tell you what you don't want to hear?"

"You said you don't want to lie to me, so don't. I can handle your true nature."

He narrows his eyes. "Who are you and what you have done to my morally-shy little rabbit?"

"Shh, she's currently sleeping. Don't wake her up."

He chuckles, the sound rumbling against my side.

I gather my courage and continue in a more somber tone, "I still prefer the truth, no matter how much it hurts."

"Last time you said that, I was ghosted."

"Won't happen this time."

"Sure as fuck won't or I'll punish you twice as hard."

My core clenches at the mention of that word and I resist the urge to clear my throat. "So? Do you want to kill?"

"More than anything. Taking someone's life, feeling as their last breaths turn to nothingness, then cutting them up to see

inside them, is the only thing I've desired since I was about seven."

His quietly spoken words shock me to the core and it must show on my face, because his eyes darken.

"See? You're disgusted."

"No," I blurt.

"Don't fucking lie to me, Glyndon." His voice lowers to a frightening range. "You look like you're on the verge of a panic attack."

"Well, I'm sorry I didn't give the reaction you wanted. I don't get told something like this every day." I inhale deeply, then exhale, forcing myself to relax.

"Then run, rabbit." He starts to release me, sounding blank, bored, but I know it's nothing more than the camouflage for his rage. "Don't let me catch you this time, because I swear to fuck, a punishment is an understatement of what I'll do to you."

"I won't."

He pauses. "What did you just say?"

"I said I won't run." I grab his hand and put it back around my middle, slowly regulating my breathing. "You were saying?"

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Listening to you. I want to know more about why you feel the need to kill."

"It's in my nature. There's nothing to explain about it." He strokes the skin between my top and shorts, sending shivers down my spine as he appears a little stunned.

I love having this effect on him.

"Why haven't you then? You must've had countless chances, especially with mafia friends."

"The bloodlust muddies my head, and I'd have little impulse control. I refuse to be a slave to my urges, to be ruled by them, and to develop a bad habit of satisfying them. Eventually, I'll lose control and get locked up for it, and that's just not going to happen. So I repress as much as I can."

"Isn't that...painful?"

"Hmm. Interesting choice of words. I would've sworn you'd be relieved to hear that I repress my urges."

"Not if you're in pain."

He grins. "Look at my little rabbit developing feelings for me."

"Shut up, I'm just empathizing. Something you don't know the meaning of."

"Tomayto, tomahto." He's still grinning. "As for the pain, it's much better than the pain of losing control. That one is irrevocable, this one is manageable."

"How often do you think about killing?"

"Per day, twenty-four times. Sometimes more in certain irritating situations. Lately, it's less."

I don't dwell on being shocked by the high number, because there's something more important.

They can lessen.

"How did the number decrease?"

"With your presence."

"W-what?"

He slides the other hand around my throat and pulls me over so his forehead rests against mine and I can see the contours of his lips and the sharp lines of his jaw.

Killian breathes me in, slowly. "You make the demons go away, even temporarily."

"How?"

"Beats me. Whatever it is you're doing, keep doing it. I like how quiet it is up here." He taps the side of his head.

I'm so incredulous and touched that I feel moisture gathering in my eyes. "Don't I make you repress more because I'm different than you are?"

"On the contrary, you bring silence. Long fucking silence."

"Does that mean I'm one of a kind?" I joke.

"You think I'd spend this much time and effort on an infuriating little rabbit like you if that weren't the case?"

"Wow. Charming."

"I know, thanks."

I roll my eyes but don't resist the urge to smile.

"I told you to stop doing that."

"No, dictator."

He grunts. "You and that fucking no word. I swear I'm going to fuck it out of your system one of these days."

"You can try." I pause then clear my throat. "So, I have a hypothetical question."

"Don't ask it."

"Come on. I'm curious."

"Shoot."

"If one day, I choose someone else over you, will you let me go?"

"I'd slice their throat, make you watch then claim you in their blood."

A shiver runs through me. "What happened to repressing?"

"Not in that *hypothetical* situation." His voice darkens. "Were you contemplating turning it to reality, baby? Hmm? Think that will get me off your case?"

"No, I mean, Cherry said if I choose someone else you'll never touch me again."

"That applies to everyone else but you. Listen carefully, baby. I'll *never* let you go."

A shudder goes through me, but instead of fear, the feeling that invades me is so similar to relief.

A splash of water soaks us and I gasp, pushing away from Killian.

"I say, you two either get a fucking room or get in here!" Nikolai, the culprit, shouts.

"Be right back, baby. Give me five minutes to kill the fucker." Killian removes his wet shirt and jumps into the pool, and I laugh as he wrestles with his cousin in the water, with Jeremy and Gareth trying to break up the fight.

My phone vibrates and I think it's Cecily since I promised to go shopping with her.

Instead, I find a text.

Unknown Number: Careful who you fraternize with, bitch.

KILLIAN

"Sleep tight and have an erotic dream where I'm eating your tight little pussy for dinner, baby." I peek through my car window. "Or filling it with my cum. Either would do."

Glyndon comes to a halt and searches our surroundings for possible eavesdroppers, then glares at me.

I love it when she glares. It's my Glyndon's love language.

And because I love it, I push, "Unless you changed your mind and would rather spend the night in my bed, which is five stars, highly recommended?"

"Dream on."

"I told you my dreams are much darker and kinkier than reality. So if you're down to explore more of your sexuality, I'm game."

She spins around and faces me. Her cheeks are red and her honey-colored hair flies in the wind. Now, I don't know what angels look like and probably never will—thank fuck I have a designated place in hell—but she's the closest thing to an angel I've ever seen.

My own angel.

Glyndon stares at me with the crookedness of an amateur detective. "Did you do that a lot? Explore your sexuality, I mean?"

"Why are you asking?"

"I'm just curious."

"If you mean did I go to sex clubs and try kinks, then yeah, I did."

She steps closer like a curious kitten. "What did you try?"

"Ropes, chains, canes, gags, bondage, breath play, knife play, impact play, D/s, S/M, objectification, electrostimulation—you name it."

Her lips part and I wave. "Hello? Earth to my little rabbit."

"Wow," she finally breathes out. "I don't even know what half of those mean."

"Which ones? I'll happily explain."

"No, thanks. You'll probably end up trying them on me."

"Not if you're not interested."

"Are you serious?"

"You really need to quit the habit of questioning everything I say."

She shifts from one foot to the other. "I'm just surprised you'd willingly forgo the chance of trying those kinks on me."

"I don't need kinks when I'm with you."

She pauses.

I pause.

The whole world fucking pauses.

That's right. I don't.

"Really...?" she trails off when she realizes she's repeating the fucking habit, then blurts, "I mean, why not? You obviously enjoyed them."

"I'm not sure I actually did enjoy them. I only went to those lengths because normal sex wasn't providing me the stimulation I needed."

"And...I do?"

"You do. Now, stop grinning like an idiot."

She flips her hair back, still smiling. "You must be so into me, huh?"

"Who's the arrogant one now?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were the only one who was allowed the privilege."

"You were an innocent little virgin not too long ago, remember? If I didn't acquaint you with eroticism, you wouldn't know what that word means."

"You still want me more than all the kinks and sex clubs."

"Looks like I created a monster. Maybe we should explore your sexuality, after all."

"Exploring my sexuality means sleeping around, hooking up. You know, the casual *kinky* sex you had but I didn't get the chance to try."

My smirk disappears. "If you're up for fucking in their blood, then sure thing. You have the green light to pick some poor souls."

"You honestly would do that, wouldn't you?"

"I'll also take pictures of the whole thing and show you them after a romantic dinner so you think twice before entertaining the idea of another dick—or pussy."

"So you get to sleep around and I don't."

"You're the only one I sleep with."

"I'm talking about before."

"Before is in the before. You don't see me going around, hunting your kindergarten crush or high school sweetheart. I could, but I probably won't."

"Probably?" she says with enough incredulousness to write a book about it.

"Since I'm actually your first, I don't hold a lot of grudge against them. I might find their names, slash their tires, and cause a little discomfort in their lives, like hiding their keys and busting their windows. Small-time felonies for small-dicked simpletons."

"I'll have you know that my secondary school boyfriend had a huge dick."

"You said that to piss me off, didn't you?"

She raises a brow. "Is it working?"

This little fucking witch is learning faster than should be allowed. I will go ahead and say that I fully expected her to run for the hills when I admitted that I liked to kill yesterday.

And I was ready to chase her the fuck down, tie her to my bed, and evidently cause her to add more hate to my dedicated section in her head.

So imagine my fucking surprise when she stayed. She was scared shitless, trembled with it, almost threw up because of it, but she stayed.

However, she did something a lot more interesting than staying.

Glyndon actually listened.

She asked questions, too, and was completely in the moment with me.

She wanted to know that side of me and refused the masks the whole world—my parents included—are comfortable with. Glyndon motherfucking King said she wanted the truth and meant it this time.

"Is it true?" I ask instead of answering her question. "Have you seen his presumptuously *huge* dick?"

"Yeah. I was a virgin, but not completely inexperienced. I fooled around."

"Hmm. I'm gonna need a name."

"Glyndon King." She offers me her hand. "Nice to meet you."

I glare at her hand, then at her face. "Is this supposed to be sarcasm?"

"Are you supposed to be this rude?" She grabs my hand and shakes it. "There, see how easy it is to actually be nice?"

I pull her by my hold on her hand and she yelps as she crashes against the side of the car.

"Easy there, cowboy," she says in a breathless voice.

"Don't be a flirt, and don't fuck with me, Glyndon. What's the sorry fuck's name?"

"Did you know that you have, like, beautiful flecks of black in your blue eyes? It's a genetic masterpiece."

"You're stalling."

"And you're supposed to be gone. Two more minutes and the stern dorm director will come to chase you away with a broom."

"A name. Last time I ask."

"Just stop it, Killian." She's half-exasperated, half-resigned. "You can't simply hunt down all the men from my past."

"And your present and future *combined*. But we'll start with the supposedly big dick guy. Sorry, I mean *huge*."

"He took some time off to volunteer in human rights organizations in Africa."

"You even keep up with his life. Go on, give me more reasons to engrave him on my shit list."

She laughs a little. "You're impossible. Do you know that?"

"Of course I do. That sentence is your everyday mantra."

"You're the one who said the past is in the past. I should be the one offended with your countless girlfriends, fuck buddies, and kinks, not the other way around."

"I never had a girlfriend. Until you, of course. Though I prefer the terms *my girl*, *my woman*, *mine* that you still haven't voiced, by the way."

Her cheeks splash in red. "What about Cherry?"

"Cherry was a warm hole. *Holes*, to be more specific."

"You're disgusting." She slips her hand from mine.

"She's a cheater and an impulsive anarchist who's addicted to more drugs than rock stars. Also, aren't you jealous of her?"

"Whatever my feelings about her are, you shouldn't speak that way about women. We're more than just holes for your entertainment."

"Aren't you a little feminist?"

"Don't put labels on me when you hate them yourself. Now, goodnight. Actually, no good night to you."

She turns to leave, but I catch her wrist and tug her until she slams back against the door. "You don't have to be difficult about everything, Glyndon. It's starting to be tiresome, repetitive, and irritating."

"Then let me go," she deadpans, her eyes igniting with a challenge.

"You still on that? Guess I haven't punished you enough."

"Fuck you."

"Oh, baby. You know that foul little mouth gets me hard."

I expect her to throw out one of her tasteless crude comments, but all expressions vanish from her face as she leans over, levels her face with mine, and whispers, "Then stay hard."

And then she swiftly pulls her hand away and walks to the door of her dorm with a seductive sway to her hips.

Did she just do that?

Yes, she fucking did, and I'm harder than earlier.

She probably didn't think that I could climb up to her window and teach her a lesson or two.

My phone vibrates with a text.

Glyndon: Don't even think about climbing up to my window. I'll be sleeping sandwiched between Ava and Cecily tonight.

A smile grazes my lips. My Glyndon is indeed a fast learner. If anyone else was starting to read me this effortlessly, I'd punch them to the next planet.

With Glyndon, I don't mind.

I know. I shocked myself with that piece of information before I could admit it to myself.

Killian: You're talking as if that would stop me.

Glyndon: Don't you dare.

Killian: Not unless you say you'll dream of sucking my cock.

Glyndon: I'll try to dream of sucking your cock until you deep-throat me and I gag on it. Happy now?

Fuck. I nearly come in my pants from her rare dirty talk.

Killian: Should've asked you to say you're mine.

Glyndon: Not in a million years.

I tap my index finger against the back of the phone, feeling the tendons of my jaw clenching.

This side of her makes me want to commit fucking murder.

My phone lights up again, and I think it's her, but it's from the Heathens' group chat.

Nikolai: I say, Killer's obsession with Glyn is tugging on my nonexistent heartstrings. Think he'll let me fuck her once he's done?

Killian: Go fuck a corpse, and while you're at it, turn into one before I find you.

Nikolai: Yo, motherfucker, didn't you block me?

Jeremy: He unblocked you to see you going rogue and getting yourself into trouble. RIP, asshole.

Nikolai: What's with the fucking RIP? Killer has the attention span of a mosquito and he'll let her go before exams start. What's wrong with me getting leftovers? I'm doing it for a very important reason. Cross my heart and hope to die, cousin.

Killian: The only leftover you'll get is your balls after I shove them down your throat. I'm serious, fucking drop it.

Nikolai: Whoa. Hold on. Did you just threaten my balls with murder for pussy? Who are you and what have you done with our Satan's heir?

Gareth: Stop it, Niko. It's different this time.

I want to go at my brother's throat, too, but that would just fuck up my mood, so I slip my phone into my pocket and drive out of REU.

A few seconds after I'm out of the main gate, something feels off.

A car is following me.

No, two.

Five.

Fuck.

I swerve to the right and drive down the dirt road, but I'm only a few seconds in when blinding light hits me in the face.

A car—or something bigger, a truck—is speeding straight in my direction with their blinding headlights on. I don't attempt to avoid it because I'd crash into the other cars.

I don't try to lessen the blow, I even step on the gas.

You want crazy? I'll give you fucking crazy.

The last thing I hear is a loud crash and the sound of the airbag when it smashes my head back.

Hot liquid slips down my forehead as my neck remains lolled in a backward position.

I'm not sure if I'm conscious, unconscious, or in between, but I can feel a sharp sting as I'm wrenched out of the car.

A very familiar, very annoying voice rings in the air. "Your seven days are up, motherfucker."

UNDERGROUND-LIKE NOISE RINGS IN MY EARS AND SHADOWY FIGURES FLY behind my orange-lined lids.

I slowly open them and a sudden throb slashes through my skull.

Motherfucker.

I haven't experienced this type of pain since a group of losers ganged up on me back in high school.

Only, this time, my head feels heavier and I'm having trouble focusing. Is it a concussion?

I'm almost sure there was no blunt force trauma during the accident since the crash wasn't that strong and the airbag

protected my head.

Though it could've happened after.

Red dots line my vision as I shake my head to chase away the blurriness. I lift my hand to clutch my temples, but they won't move.

I stare down, and sure enough, both my wrists are bound behind my back and my legs are strapped to the legs of the metal chair I'm in.

Fucking perfect.

Judging by the charcoal-colored walls and the bright neon lights, this is the underground.

My first bet would logically be the Serpents. They have a bone to pick with us, and Jeremy has been hitting them where it hurts for years. As a result, their retaliation was a matter of when, not if.

Assaulting and kidnapping me seems legit and predictable.

But that would only apply if I'd been kidnapped within TKU or if the chase had happened close to our compounds.

REU might be full of posh folks who worship the queen's pristine shoes, but they have their own club. And Serpent or not, they'd be vulnerable here.

It's not their territory.

It's Elites' grounds.

And I happen to have pissed off one of them, unintentionally—or maybe intentionally, considering all the couple shots I've become a fan of posting on social media lately.

The last picture I posted is of Glyndon sleeping on my lap, her face hidden by my naked chest and only half of mine visible. She's wearing shorts and a red tank top and her arms are wrapped around my middle.

She wears red for me.

That could and would anger him. Which is one of the reasons I posted it, not the main one, though. That would be my constant need to stake a claim on the little rabbit.

Sure enough, when the door opens, the one who strides inside, dressed all in black with a golf club resting on his shoulder, is none other than Landon.

Usually, the Elites put on white and gold masquerade masks during rivals' week, but he obviously thinks that detail isn't needed in this situation.

He wants me to know he's the one behind this.

It's personal.

"Morning, Sleeping Beauty," he says casually. "I hope you had a good one, because you might not be able to sleep for a while."

"Oh my, I'm shaking." I mirror his tone. "Is this the part where I start to cry?"

"I know you can't, but thanks for the effort." He glances over his shoulder. "Do we have the water?"

"Enough to drown an elephant."

Now, this is a surprise.

The owner of the last line is none other than Eli King. He's about the same height as Landon, dressed in denim, and is currently dragging a giant hose.

Upon seeing me, he pauses, but his expression remains the same. "It's nothing personal, Kill. Just family business."

"I'm wounded. I thought we shared a connection."

He props an elbow on Landon's shoulder. "Not more than the one I share with this one. Imagine if I let him loose? *Jesus*. We'd have a massacre on our hands. Got to play my role as the eldest King and put him on some sort of leash. Besides, you ghosted me, Killer. Damn near cried myself to sleep when we were kids."

"Aww." I match his mocking voice. "I'd never do that. Your parents and my parents are annoyingly smart and figured out early on that we shouldn't mingle or they'd have bloodbaths to clean up. Plural. If it's of any consolation, I missed you."

"Missed you, too, little Kill. But don't go changing lanes after you f—*touched* my cousin." Eli raises a brow. "She'd cry."

"Are you done with whatever fucked-up shit you're on?" Landon glares at the both of us, probably blindsided by my acquaintance with his cousin.

Eli and I met when we were young, when his parents visited mine in the States. I was around six that time and he was twelve, and even though we were practically strangers, it was the first time I found someone whose look mirrored mine.

That encounter was fascinating and irritating. I ended up beating his brother, Creighton, up just to rile him, and he would've ripped me a new one if Gareth, righteous golden boy Gareth, hadn't intervened.

Fun times.

Just when I think all the players are here, a third person walks inside wearing jogging clothes. No kidding. Creighton appears as if he stumbled upon the place by chance.

Eli releases Landon and frowns at his brother. "What are you doing here?"

"Last I checked, I'm part of the King family." That's genuinely the most I've heard the emo fuck say. He usually stands at the corner of the table, spoken to but never replies, and is constantly bugged by both Remington and Annika.

A fact I'm intentionally keeping from Jeremy until further notice.

That notice is now.

He'll regret messing with me when Jeremy uses his blood as his room's wallpaper.

Besides, I've done my research on Glyndon's family, and the seemingly docile, pretty boy actually has dark tastes no one is aware of.

Except for maybe Eli.

"I called him over," Landon says without breaking eye contact with me.

"Then maybe I should call Brandon over, too," Eli announces.

"If you want him to personally report us, then by all means."

"I must say, I'm touched. You gathered almost the entire King clan just for me. If I'd known there would be a welcome-to-the-family ceremony, I would've put on my tux."

Landon rolls his neck until the bones crack. "You think I'm playing?"

"I know you're not. But don't you think this is too extreme for the occasion?"

"Not as extreme as you sleeping with my sister when I clearly told you not to."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know I needed permission from anyone about the status of our growing relationship."

"Now, you do."

"What are your demands, Your Majesty?"

"No demands, just torture." He nods at Eli and he directs the high-pressure water straight in my face.

I was ready for it since they showcased their weapon of choice, but actually being blinded by water and breathing it instead of air is different in a practical sense.

The force physically jerks my head back and someone holds my shoulders from behind, keeping me in place.

My lungs burn and I swallow more water than I can handle. The spasms in my limbs increase in intensity until they're close to seizure level.

It's fucking irritating when my physical being chooses to fail my mind.

Just when I think I'll faint, the flow stops. I cough, spluttering on all the water and dragging it and air in through my mouth.

My hair and clothes are soaked, the droplets forming a pool on the ground.

Once I've gotten enough air, I burst out laughing. "That's all you got? What are you? A fucking amateur?"

"I wouldn't provoke him if I were you." Eli speaks in a tone that I would believe intends good if I didn't already know that the motherfucker left his soul in his mother's womb and was miraculously born without one.

"If you're going to torture me, do it properly and draw some blood. This isn't some kid's game."

Creighton—who was the one grabbing my shoulders all this time—releases me and stalks to the door without a word.

"Where are you going, punk?" Eli asks.

"Out. I'm bored." And then he leaves as if he was never there.

"Fucker needs his head checked," Eli says with fake sympathy.

"Shouldn't you set an example and do it first, E?" I taunt with a grin.

He merely stares at me blankly.

"Here's how it will go." Landon drags his club on the ground, creating a screeching, annoying sensory sound, and keeps the rhythm as he speaks. "Once we're done with our little get-together here, you're going to nurse your wounds, then text my

baby sis that you no longer want her, and you'll be brutal about it. I want you to make her hate you so it'll be easier for her to forget you."

"Question." I interrupt in a super-serious tone. "I would've raised my hand, but they're bound. Unless you want to change that?" When he keeps dragging his golf club on the ground, I continue. "Doesn't hurt to ask. So my question is, would that plan work if she already hates me?"

"That's a damn good question," Eli agrees.

"Thanks, man."

"Doesn't matter what she feels for you now. I'll make sure she leaves you behind. And I will personally choose the next man in her life."

For the first time since this whole charade started, I want to bash Landon's skull with his golf club and watch his brains splatter on the walls.

This motherfucker can hurt me all he wants, but giving Glyndon to someone else is where his life starts to be in jeopardy.

"You mean someone you can manipulate?" I smirk. "Let me guess, you personally approved of all her previous boring boyfriends, probably threatened them not to touch her either. Hmm, I don't think she'll react well to that information."

"Not sure she'd care about that when she learns what you did at your old school."

My smirk remains in place, but it falters for a bit and it's Landon's turn to smirk. "That's right, I did my research and even fucked the skeletons in your closet. A bit dry, but they'd do. Not sure our little princess would like them that much. Isn't that right, Eli?"

"I'm inclined to agree. Our Glyn was always a scaredy-cat, never liked skeletons."

"Or hypocrites."

"Or you." I grin.

"The fuck did you just say?"

"Your own brother and sister don't even like you, so you fill that emptiness with sculptures and this whole bullshit. Very sad."

He swings his club and hits me across the face. Eli opens the water, and this time, I swing and fall backward.

The loud thud echoes in the air as my body hits the ground.
My vision blackens from the lack of air as cold water drenches me whole.

Ah, fuck.

I'm going to lose consciousness. Or worse, maybe die.

People say their life flashes before their eyes in the last moments, but that's not what happens.

My life isn't what I see.

It's Glyndon smiling. I always liked her sweet little smile, probably because it was rarely ever directed at me.

She's smiling at me now, calling my name, but I can't hear her.

A commotion snaps me from the image that I was enjoying.

The water stops and I twist onto my side, coughing and inhaling air as if through small straws.

"What is wrong with you?" Brandon pushes at Eli's chest. "How can you help him with this?"

"He asked nicely?" Eli says casually.

"Stop it!"

My blood roars in my ears at the sound of her voice. Glyndon.

From my blurry vision, I can make out her silhouette getting in Landon's face.

"I told him to stay away, he didn't listen, so I'm just teaching him a valuable lesson here, little princess."

"And who the hell are you to teach people lessons? Do you really consider yourself a god? News flash, you're not."

"He's manipulating you and will eventually hurt you."

"That's still nothing for you to concern yourself with."

"You don't know what's good for you, Glyn."

"I'm old enough to make my own life choices and I'm choosing this, Lan. I'm finally choosing someone myself, without them having to go through your approval process. Can't you let me have that?"

Can I kiss her and not die? Actually, I'm fine with dying for this kiss.

"No," Landon says dismissively. "Now, take Bran and leave."

"No."

"What the fuck did you just say?"

"I said no, Lan. Fucking *no*. I'm sick and tired of your controlling ways and tiptoeing around you and avoiding you. I'm so damn tired. Just stop. Stop being so out of line, stop making us scared of you. We aren't supposed to be scared of our own brother."

"Glyn..." Bran comes to her side, trying to pull her back, but my fucking girl slips away from his hold.

"No, we're doing this, Bran."

"That's my ticket out." Eli waves. "Happy family meeting, Kings."

Bran softens his voice. "Glyn, this isn't the right time."

"And when is the right time? For how long are we supposed to take this from him? This is about as right a time as any to tell him we're through pretending to like him in front of Mum and Dad. We're through covering his actions and making him appear to be a perfect genius when he's nothing more than an unfeeling person. You're supposed to be on our side, not against us, Lan. We're family, not enemies. Bran is your twin brother, not your competition. I'm your sister, not your damn property."

"Is the word vomit done?" Landon's expression doesn't change, but he sounds edgy.

That's right. I pushed straight where it hurts.

I told him his siblings don't like him and he's now seeing the proof.

"No," Glyndon says. "You'll let Killian go and stop meddling in my business."

"And if I say no?"

"I'll tell Grandpa, Papa, and Uncle. When they find out about all your actions, they'll put you on a leash."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Just like you threatened us all our lives. Tastes bitter coming from your family, doesn't it?" Then she runs toward me and I think I let go then.

She's here.

It's all good now.

"Killian! Kill! Open your eyes..." She lifts my head on her lap, fawning over me with worry dripping from her every word and touch.

She's really my custom-made angel, my Glyndon.

As she holds me, I meet Landon's gaze and smirk.

I knew Bran would come, because Eli doesn't like Creighton involved, and since Landon twisted his arm, he'd definitely bring in Brandon as a form of retaliation.

As soon as Creighton appeared, Eli fished out his phone and typed something—probably a text to Brandon to inform him of the current situation.

If he knew I was here, he would surely bring Glyndon.

I could've escaped earlier by using the Zippo in my back pocket, but I already knew Landon would get me sooner or later.

The moment I saw Eli's discreet anger in seeing Creighton involved, I plotted this.

This scene had to happen.

If Glyndon saw her brother torture me, she'd definitely be on my side, not his. She'd sympathize with me, hate her brother, and would want to save me.

Her standing up to him and getting all that baggage off her chest was only a bonus.

Happy to serve, baby.

Landon narrows his eyes, probably having figured out my plan. But there's nothing he can do now.

He'll never, *ever* be able to get between me and Glyndon if he doesn't want to be the one who's hated instead.

One-nil, motherfucker.

GLYNDON

I pace the length of Killian's room with rigid steps, trying and failing to calm the shaking of my fingers. "Maybe we should get the doctor again so he can make sure he's really okay."

"He is." Gareth leans against the wall, arms and legs crossed. "It'd take more than waterboarding to hurt him."

"I apologize again on behalf of my brother." Brandon, who helped me carry and drive Killian to the Heathens' mansion, runs a hand through his hair. "He's just...protective."

"Stop trying to find excuses for him, Bran." The words sound guttural coming from my lips.

"I know you're mad at him, and I'm not trying to defend his wrong actions, but he's still our brother, Glyn. Yes, he's overprotective and shows it in all the destructive ways, but it's because he doesn't want us to be weak or taken advantage of."

"That doesn't give him the right to dictate our lives. Don't even try to stop me when I finally remove his mask in front of Mum and Dad."

Bran grabs at the hairs on the back of his head, with enough force to make me worry that he's hurting himself.

It reminds me of something Grandpa said about Bran and how much he's like his first wife, Uncle Aiden's mum.

Bran hates conflict so much that he lets his emotions devour him from the inside out. And that part of him makes me sick with worry because Uncle Aiden's mum had a horrible ending.

It's just unfair that Lan doesn't feel and Bran feels too much.

My brother releases his grip on his hair, his voice coming out gentle. "We'll talk about this when you're more cooled down. You've been on a high of emotions this entire night."

It's then I realize that I've been rubbing my palm against the side of my shorts back and forth until it's turned red.

My breathing is deeper, raw, and abnormal. I inhale deeply and let the fight leave my system. I slowly make my way to Killian's side and flop to a sitting position on the bed where he lies.

When I reached the dorm, Bran called and told me there was an accident near campus caused by multiple cars and that he was sure Landon was behind it.

Sometime later, he screenshotted a text that included a location.

Eli: By the decree of his majesty the king (that's your brother tonight), join us in defending Glyn's honor, Middle Ages style.

I was skeptical at first, until Bran mentioned that Lan gave Killian seven days to leave me and today happened to be the deadline.

We didn't have to waste time finding the location Eli sent because Bran was already familiar with the place.

I don't even want to think about why he knows of Lan's torture chamber—or worse, if something happened to him there before.

In the midst of the chaos, I contemplated calling Killian's friends, but Gareth wouldn't have cared and Jeremy, and especially Nikolai, would have undoubtedly killed my brother, and that just wasn't how I wanted this dealt with.

As much as I'm not a fan of Lan sometimes, Bran is right. He's our brother. Family.

Killian appears peaceful when asleep, his eternally beautiful face caught in a serene expression that I want to sketch and breathe life back into.

When we brought him in earlier, I called Gareth on the way and he was waiting for us at the front gate. He helped Bran carry him upstairs. Then he changed his brother's clothes to dry ones and called the family doctor.

The latter said he has a fever, prescribed him some meds, and left.

I stroke the half-damp strands off his forehead and a sudden chill rips down my spine.

When I saw him on the ground earlier, all wet, half-conscious, and completely out of it, fear like I've never experienced before made me lose control.

It wasn't courage, it wasn't anger, it was pure fear that made me give Landon a piece of my mind. It was my feelings of horror that allowed me to finally confront him after years of avoiding, placating, and living by his rules.

I was that much of a coward before. I'm not now and it's all because of the freaking bastard lying unconscious.

Since when has he become such a vital part of my life that I feel on the edge just at the thought of him being hurt?

He coerced, threatened, and gave me no choice but to submit to him. He's as much of a villain in this story as my brother is.

Actually, he's way worse.

But I can admit to myself that I'm attracted to him, I'm attracted to how he confiscates my control and leaves me no choice but to let go.

I can also admit that he's the reason I'm out of my shell. That I'm no longer the conflict-avoiding, pacifying, no-say-in-anything Glyn.

It wasn't until I saw him in danger that I realized he brings out the best and worst in me and I'm addicted to the feeling.

I'm addicted to how he puts me above everything else, how he goes out of his way to make sure I eat—even bugs Anni about it. I'm addicted to the way he looks at me when he thinks I'm not looking and how he didn't listen to my brother's demands and, instead, chose to stay with me.

I'm addicted to *him*.

The door swings open without as much as a knock and I startle as Nikolai peeks inside. "Heard Kill nearly got killed. See what I did there? Also, whose head do I have to cut from their body, rip the flesh from, and hang on a stick—

He interrupts himself and fully stalks inside with a rare shine in his eyes. He's half-naked—I swear the guy is allergic to clothes—

and all his tattoos are on full display like a map of destruction. Those, coupled with his massive build, make him intimidating as hell.

At least Killian is easygoing sometimes unless provoked. Nikolai never appears nonchalant—his cutthroat exterior is his true self.

And he's watching my brother closely, with chilling calculation. "Now, what do we fucking have here? Did a lotus get lost?"

Bran remains still, but his fingers have found their way to his hair again and they're tugging stronger than earlier.

"Was it this one who hurt our Kill, Gaz?" Nikolai asks slowly, menacingly, and the bulging of his muscles matches the hostile energy.

He's honing himself for a fight, a quarrel.

Or any form of violence.

My heart beats in an irregular rhythm. *Shit*. What if Gareth tells him and Nikolai chooses to hurt Bran just to get back at Lan?

Before I can step in to try to smooth out the situation, Gareth says, "No. Brandon and Glyndon drove him here. They found him near their campus. For more details about the culprit, we have to wait for Killian to wake up."

If I could hug Gareth, I would. And I'm not even a hugger. He got us out of this situation with enough ease to baffle me.

"Is that so?" Nikolai speaks to Bran. "You carried the motherfucker Kill all on your own? I thought you were a dainty lotus, but maybe you're stronger than you look."

"I'm going back," Bran says in a low voice. "Want to come, Glyn?"

"No, I'm staying the night." If I'd done so from the beginning instead of fighting for useless independence, then maybe none of this would've happened.

Or maybe I'm just placating myself.

Bran frowns, but then he nods, tells me to call him if I need anything, then leaves. Nikolai silently follows him and I have a feeling it's not because he just wants to show him the way out.

Maybe I should've gone with Bran, after all.

"You can go if you want. I'll take care of his meds," Gareth tells me from his unmoving position on the wall.

"I want to do it." My voice softens. "And thank you for covering up for Lan just now."

"I was only leaving the ball in Kill's court so he can personally deal with the situation when he wakes up. Besides, Niko is the *kill first, ask questions later* type, so he shouldn't be privy to any details until a plan is in place."

"Fair enough."

Silence prevails for a beat before he says in a quiet tone, "You're seriously worried about him?"

"You aren't?"

The air vibrates with the length of his sigh. "No. He made sure to kill that part of me a decade ago when he used my concern to put the blame on me for things he'd done. Spoiler alert, though not really, that's exactly what he'll do to you eventually. Any noble feelings you have for him will be twisted, vilified, falsified until they become as dark as his."

"That won't be happening."

"I said that, too, once upon a time."

"You said, but you didn't take action, Gareth. I'm not going to pretend that I understand what it's like growing up with him, but I have a brother who's similar to him. He tried to destroy everything beautiful in my and Bran's lives so that we only depended on him and were at his beck and call, but do you see us being like him? Do you see us manipulating, hurting, absolutely discarding our morals just to adapt to him?"

He raises a brow. "Is that supposed to be a jab at me?"

"It's concern." My voice softens. "Killian, Landon, and my cousin, Eli, were born different. They don't have the luxury of feeling emotions like we do, and yes, they're prone to hurt others without batting an eye because of that, but it's who they are. It's not who *you* are, Gareth. You're choosing to be like them, and if you see nothing wrong with that, then I feel sorry for you."

"So you're saying I should take Killian's manipulations, blows, and pure fucking hatred and do nothing about it, is that it?"

"No. But you could talk about it. He has beef with you because he feels lesser than you."

He laughs with a deranged edge. "Are you maybe talking about a different Killer than the one sleeping on that bed?"

"He heard your dad tell your mum that they should've only had you. That would automatically make him hold a grudge against you."

A line appears between Gareth's brows. "He could be lying to get your sympathy."

"He's always been honest to me. The brutal kind."

"Or maybe that's what he wants you to believe." He pushes off the wall and heads to the door.

"Gareth," I call after him.

"Yeah?"

"Our deal is off. I'm not going to stab him in the back so you can hurt him. Deep down, I know you don't want that either."

"I saw this coming a mile away. This is a piece of genuine advice, Glyndon. Be careful. You might think you care for him now, but there will be times where you'll want to kill him, and you won't think about his nature or that he's different. You'll only think that he's a motherfucking asshole who shouldn't exist. And when you want to leave? He'll break your legs so you never consider the option. And if you heal and attempt it again? He'll cut them off." He smiles, but it's fake as he steps out and lets the door close behind him.

My focus slides back to Killian and I narrow my eyes on him. "Bastard. When did you get me on your defense team?"

I blame the sense of peace I feel in his company. Even when he's choking me, throwing me down, and fucking me like a madman.

I blame it more on when he pulls me to sleep on top of him after, or when he takes me to watch fireflies because he knows how much they bring me joy.

Unable to ignore the onslaught of feelings running rampant in my chest, I borrow his notebook and a charcoal pencil—that Killian started to keep around—then I place the chair opposite the bed. I don't look at the paper. My whole attention is on him while my fingers stroke line after line until I'm transported into a different zone.

It's like my physical body ceases to exist and I'm a burst of emotions, swishes, and a manifestation of an extremely unpredictable muse.

I think it only takes me ten minutes from start to finish, but when I look at the time, it's already two in the morning.

Thank God it's a weekend and I can sleep in tomorrow.

Yawning, I strip down to my underwear. Then I borrow one of Killian's T-shirts that basically serves as a nightgown.

It's crazy how normal and familiar this feels, especially when I compare it to how I was ready to stab him to death only a few weeks ago.

I slip under the covers and pause when I feel his hot skin. The doctor said the fever would go down in a while, but how long is a while?

Shouldn't it be now?

I lay my head on his shoulder and yelp when he turns completely in my direction and wraps both arms around me, then places me on top of him. Even while his eyes are closed.

Pleasure pools in my knickers and I clench my thighs.

I think the bastard has orgasm-trained me or something. Being on top of him only happens after he fucks my brains out. When sex isn't the main focus, he sits me between his legs or on his lap. So now that the fucking hasn't happened and I'm on top, my body is acting up because of it.

I rub myself against his semi-hard erection, then stop.

What the hell am I doing? He's sleeping and feverish and I should go to hell for this.

Forcing myself to calm down, I close my eyes and let sleep whisk me away.

A MOAN SLIPS FROM MY THROAT.

Another one follows.

And another.

Oh, God.

His hands slide up my stomach to my nipple and then down again, but that's not all.

My core clenches due to being rubbed on and on by his very hard cock.

I'm such a pervert for dreaming about this when he's sick, but I guess I underestimated my sexually frustrated state when I went to sleep.

"You're so fucking beautiful, baby. Sometimes I want to cage you so no one but me can look at you." Even his voice is slightly slurred but so deliciously deep and dark, like when he's touching me for real.

The dream gets ten out of ten for details.

"I want to shoot everyone who dares to look in your direction or cause you pain. I want to bathe in their fucking blood and throw their insides at your feet. I want to fuck you there, too, in their blood, to stake a claim. You'd probably bolt if I said this to you directly, so I won't. I'll just keep owning you over and over, until you can no longer think about leaving me. I'll be your shadow so no one dares to hurt you."

He accentuates his words with a rub against my pussy, a pinch to my nipple, a bite to my stomach. He's everywhere, and I wish that was the only reason I was turned on.

His words have the strangest effect on me, they make me delirious and greedy for more.

Maybe I'm sick, too, for being this aroused by his threats of murder for me.

His fingers leave my nipples and slide to my throat. The moment they squeeze, my air vanishes.

Killian throws my leg up against his chest and he pounds inside in one delicious go.

This isn't a dream.

My eyes fly open, and sure enough, I'm completely naked. My legs are flung over his shoulders as he holds them hostage with one hand while the other is currently on the verge of suffocating me.

Wasn't this crazy bastard feverish not too long ago? Actually, he still is, judging by his hot touch.

Or maybe that's me.

Just how can he have this intense power, even worse than usual, when he's sick?

Apparently, my body doesn't understand that logic, considering the sluicing sound of his cock going in and out of me.

The fact that he didn't give a fuck that I was asleep and took what he wanted anyway makes me a mess.

A wanton mess.

I dig my fingers in his wrist, fruitlessly trying to ease his hold on my neck even as I soak his dick and the sheets with my arousal.

"That's it. Fight, baby." His expression is manic, absolutely terrifying. "The more you do, the harder I fuck you."

I go berserk, scratching and clawing and trying to hurt him anywhere I can reach.

And as he promised, he fucks me harder and faster, with a power that knocks the living breath out of me.

"That's my fucking girl," he grunts, his eyes half closed, probably with both dark lust and the fever's pain. "You're the most beautiful I've ever seen when you're taking my cock like a dirty little whore." He releases my legs. "Keep them there. If they fall, we'll start all over again." Then he reaches between us and glides my arousal to my back hole, making me shudder, then thrusts a finger inside. "Your ass is feeling lonely. Look at it clenching around my finger wanting to take part in the fun. You'll let me fuck you raw until you're screaming my name, won't you?"

I'm choking on my breaths and unable to think, just feel.

So I fall into that sensation of being completely ravaged by him. His hand, his cock, and his finger in my arse are all moving at the same time, creating the maddest chaos.

"Maybe I should fuck it right now so you know what a huge cock actually feels like."

My eyes widen, and I come, just like that. I think there's something wrong with me, because this is definitely one of the strongest orgasms I've had yet.

My moans mix with chopped-off screams and it goes on and on, until I think I'll pass out.

"Such an innocent face for a dirty little slut. Your mouth likes to sing the 'no' tune, but you're choking my cock at the promise of me taking your ass like an animal." His lips pull in a snarl. "And yet, that motherfucking brother of yours dares to say he'll give you to someone else. He has the audacity to think I'd let anyone but me see you like this."

It's that rage again, it's bleeding off him in waves, and he stretches my back hole with his finger as his rhythm goes out of control.

"The only reason he's not buried six feet under is because of you, Glyndon."

I believe him. Wholeheartedly.

Shit.

If it wasn't for whatever fixation he has on me and the knowledge that I would rather die than have him hurt my brother, he'd totally take it personally.

He *is* taking it personally.

But I still feel a tiny bit of relief at the knowledge that the thought of me, not my actions, have the power to stop him.

He eases his hold on my throat. "Say you're mine."

"Stop it, Killian." I pant, downright shivering with the remnants of my orgasm. "You're feverish."

"I can still stuff you with my cum while you orgasm again. Now, say the fucking words, Glyndon."

I shake my head, even as tears of pleasure gather in my eyes.

"If this is playing hard to get, then you've taken it too fucking far. Say it."

"I can't," I force out.

"Then you might as well not speak again." His hand that was around my throat slams on my mouth.

Killian opens my legs far apart so he can fit between them as he leans close. The new position gives him more depth and he fucks me like a madman and thrusts another finger in my arse, stretching me to the brim.

I can't scream or moan, and any sound I release comes out haunted, muffled, and absolutely terrifying.

He's probably thinking about killing me, but I'm coming again.

Just being handled roughly by him, not being allowed to even scream, is enough to have me shatter to pieces.

No matter how much I try to deny it, I love this part of him.

This part of us.

"I knew you were custom-made for me, baby." He still sounds angry, but he's aroused. "I'm going to fill you up with my cum so you know exactly who you fucking belong to."

I shudder as warmth spreads over my insides. I expect him to pull out, but he stays there, semi-hard and slowly rocks his hips as if making sure that not one drop leaves.

Killian watches me, half focused, his eyes almost closed, but he continues the erotic movements.

"Maybe I should fill you up with my baby," he murmurs, so low I can barely hear him. "That way you can't escape me."

Then he releases my mouth, collapses on top of me, absolutely burning, and completely crushes me with his weight.

I push at his shoulders, but he's as unmoving as a buffalo.

"Killian," I strain.

He grunts and effortlessly flips us over so he's carrying my weight, but he's still deep inside me.

"I can sleep on the bed," I whisper.

"My body is a better bed," he slurs back without opening his eyes.

"Take medication, you're burning up."

"Mmm."

"Killian..."

His arms wrap around my middle, keeping me in place as he inhales me. "You chose me."

"What?"

"Back there, you chose me in front of your brother. *Brothers*, plural. And that fucker Eli."

Shit. He was conscious during that?

Killian kisses the top of my head and before I can backpedal, he says the words that go straight to my heart. "I'll make sure you always choose me as much as I choose you."

GLYNDON

I 'm losing a piece of myself.

And it's happening so fast that I can't catch my breath during the process.

In fact, I only realized it when I couldn't sleep in the flat I share with the girls anymore. It became absolutely strange and appalling to sleep on any bed other than Killian's.

It's been three weeks since that night I woke up with his dick inside me and slowly fused my life with his.

I'm losing control—or whatever control I have.

Which is why I'm drinking right now with everyone in a downtown quiet-ish pub. Well, as quiet as pubs that uni kids go to can get. At least it's not rowdy like the bigger club on the other side of town.

An unknown band plays in the background, the music drowned out by the sound of chatter and the pinging of billiard balls. The smell of alcohol permeates the air or maybe just my nose.

I don't usually drink, because it makes me act like a fool, but it's not like I'm doing it with strangers.

After making sure I have enough shots to send me into a coma, I down the fifth. No, I think it's the seventh.

"Easy on the alcohol, Glyn," Cecily chastises from beside me. She's been nursing one glass of tequila since we got here.

"Let her be." Remi slides a shot glass in my direction. "I love drunk Glyndon."

I smile with one eye open and hold the glass up, then drink it. "One in your honor, Remi."

"Hell to the fucking yeah." He pours another shot down his throat. "My lordship has decided to forgive you for choosing this boring pub."

I roll my hand exaggeratingly and bow. "Much appreciated, Your Majesty."

"It's your lordship, peasant."

"Her mum has a lady title." Ava pokes him with a chip. "Ignorant much?"

"Wait, really? How come I'm only finding out about this now?" Remi looks up, placing an L on his chin in a comical thoughtful gesture. "Must be because you all act like peasants, except for you, Bran. You're definitely aristocracy. Beautiful, suave, and with that untouchable charisma. You take that after me."

Bran shakes his head. "I was born before you, Remi."

"So? You can still take after me. Isn't that right, Cray Cray?"

My cousin seems more preoccupied with his phone than anyone at the table.

Annika lounges opposite him, looking like a real-life Barbie. She stopped chattering on and on in Creigh's company lately and even started to distance herself. Not sure if it's because she gets absolutely no answer in return or she couldn't be bothered anymore. Sometimes, I feel sorry for her. She had to be interested in someone who doesn't feel the need to talk.

It's why he gets along with Bran. They can sit around for hours on end and not say a word. No kidding. Ava and Remi tested it once.

Since Bran gets along with Mia, Creigh could, too, if he meets her. Though in the few times we've gotten together over the past couple of weeks, I gathered that she's expressive, just doesn't talk. Killian said it's due to an incident that took place in her childhood. And he's become her personal translator whenever Bran and I are around.

Sometimes, he'll be a dick and refuse to, so she's teaching us sign language now.

Despite his wanker behavior, I like Killian when Mia's around. He treats her like his little sister, just like Nikolai does. Her twin, Maya, told me that he once broke a high school boy's jaw because he kept bullying her for being 'mute.'

Nikolai was offended that he was the last to hear, so when the boy healed, he sent him back to the ER for other injuries.

And while the recounting of events had me shocked for a while, I'm more touched about his involvement in Mia's life.

It's a side of him that shows he can care. That, under the right circumstances, he can consider something precious.

Or maybe I'm just deluding myself.

One more shot.

"Seriously, Glyn, aren't you going too far?" Cecily and her doppelgänger frown.

"When did you get a twin?" I slur.

"When you're drunk."

"Pfft, I'm not drunk. Come on, guys. Let's play a game."

"How about an I'm ghosting my friends for dick game," Ava grumbles, probably drunk herself. She can't hold her alcohol to save her life.

"Didn't need that image." Bran grimaces and she winces, then hugs his shoulder.

"Ugh. Sorry about that."

"Apology accepted. Now, can you please stop touching me, or I'll be in worse trouble if Eli finds out about this."

Her cheeks turn red. "Eli can go fuck himself."

Everyone but Creighton gasps. I giggle. "You go, girl."

It's her turn to bow to me, "Thank you, my lady."

"For public record and life insurance reasons, my lordship did not hear that. I recommend that you all do the same if you plan to live for more than a few days."

"As much as I hate to say this, I agree with Remi," Cecily says. "Let us all pretend Ava didn't say that."

"But I did say it, and I'd say it again. Fuck E—"

Cecily slaps a hand on her mouth. "You're drunk, you little shit. When you wake up in the morning, you'll remember this and thank me and your lucky stars."

"You're too young to have a funeral, Ava." Bran passes her a cold glass of water. "Drink this and start to develop amnesia."

Ava grumbles some more about how we're all fucking cowards, among other colorful words.

I slap my hands on the table. "Game! Game! Game!"

"God, this is my lordship asking you to make a permanent drunk version of Glyn. Amen." Remi grins at me. "What type of game?"

"Dunno. Never have I ever?"

"Let's do this!" He holds an imaginary mic. "I'll go first."

"You always go first," Cecily says.

"That's right." Ava puffs her chest. "Glyn wanted this, so let her play first."

"Play what?"

My spine jerks and I think I'm definitely drunk, because my reaction is delayed as hell. It takes me some time to realize that the voice isn't in my head.

I become aware of the thickening of the air, and how it mixes with his cologne. How his presence slowly but surely eats up the atmosphere and leaves no oxygen to breathe.

This isn't fair. I'm supposed to be trying to get him out of my head tonight.

"What are you doing here?" I slur, then place a hand on my mouth.

There's a single tap of his index finger on his thigh, then he physically pushes his company to the forefront. "Nikolai was bored, so I took him out for a stroll."

"Eat shit, motherfucker. I'm not a dog. Also, he was the one who was so bored that he started vandalizing shit," Nikolai tells me. "I was dragged out against my will because he refuses to admit he misses you."

"Semantics," Killian says casually. "Can we join you?"

Careful silence has fallen over the table.

They're used to Killian, but Nikolai is a different story altogether. They think he's terrifying, and I agree.

He was bubbling with the need to avenge Killian after the kidnapping and torture Lan performed. Killian, however, waved him off and said he'll deal with it himself.

I know he did it for me, because he realizes I don't want Lan hurt, but that barely dulled Nikolai's need for vengeance.

He's brutal, and it shows in each of his actions.

But I've been seeing him every day and listening to his entertaining retellings of his childhood adventures with Killian, so

I don't really view him in that light. *Much*.

Everyone at the table most definitely does. Probably because of his permanent scowl and all the tattoos.

Annika has physically distanced herself from sitting opposite Creighton's side and sneakily changed seats so that she's beside Ava.

And for the first time since we got here, Creighton raises his head, flips his phone facedown on the table, and looks between Annika and the two newcomers.

"Yeah, sure!" It's Ava who announces, definitely high on liquid courage. "The more the merrier."

Killian drags a chair from a nearby table and glues himself to my side, and Nikolai joins him, appearing solemn-faced.

I poke Killian, squinting so I can have a better look at his handsome face. "You said to have fun on my night out with friends."

"Never said I wouldn't pay a visit." He winks.

"Shouldn't you be busy with school?"

"Never too busy for you, baby."

"Aren't you the charming one?"

"Only with you."

"Why have you brought Nikolai?" I whisper. "He's terrifying them."

"He's not that scary."

I raise a brow.

"*That* being the operative word." He smiles, then says in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, "So what are we playing?"

"Never have I ever," Bran says, sounding a bit choked. "And Glyn will start."

You know what? I'm just going to have fun and forget it all tonight. Screw Killian.

I raise a shot. "Never have I ever done something illegal."

Nikolai lifts a shoulder and downs a shot. Creighton does it without a word.

"What did you do..." Annika asks, then backpedals, swallows, and stares at Nikolai. "Nikolai?"

"You know the drill."

Ava takes a shot and Cecily and I stare at her dumbfounded.

"What illegal things have you done?" Ces asks.

"Sorry, bitches, there are no rules that say I have to explain. Should've set that beforehand."

Remi downs a shot. "Drugs, those nasty little shits."

"Why aren't you drinking?" I ask Killian.

"Because I'm not admitting to doing anything illegal. My father and grandfather are lawyers, thank you very much."

"That's not how it works."

"Do you have proof that I committed illegal action?"

"Ugh, whatever." I roll my eyes.

"Don't do that," he whispers low so I'm the only one who hears.

I make a face at him and a strange fire brightens in his eyes, as if he's amused but also doesn't like it.

Jeez. He's a conundrum.

"Your turn," I murmur, suddenly nervous for what he'll say.

He has a tendency to be unpredictable with no care in the world for others' feelings.

"Never have I ever...been in love."

My heart squeezes and I think I'm going to throw up. Is he doing this on purpose because he feels the change?

Does he see it on my face, too? Like when I look at myself in the mirror?

Ava and Brandon are the only ones who drink to that and they get shit from everyone and deathly glares from Nikolai.

Or maybe the glare is only for one of them.

But all the noise is drowned by my internal ticking bomb.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

I raise a shot with shaky fingers to drink, but before it can meet my lips, Killian snatches it and downs it with utter ease.

"You're drunk, I'll take your shots."

"I don't need you to." And why the hell does he sound so unapproving for?

"Swoon." Annika puts her hands together, watching us with an expression full of awe.

"We need to take this game to the next level." Nikolai holds out a shot. "Never have I ever fucked or experimented with someone of the same sex."

Then he drinks his shot.

Well, that's weird.

Nikolai could've just picked something he's actually never have done.

"Does a kiss count?" Ava asks, and he nods.

"Well, screw it." She downs a shot.

Remi slams a hand on his chest as if he's about to have a stroke. "This bitch is really looking to get herself killed tonight."

Killian raises a shot and I stare at him incredulously.

"Don't look like you'll faint, little rabbit. Do you really believe all those kinks were done with only women? I used to experiment a lot."

As he drinks, I pick up a shot and down it in one go.

He narrows his eyes.

"Don't look surprised, Killer. I used to experiment a lot, too," I lie through my teeth, but I think he believes it, because he places his hand on my thigh and squeezes. Hard.

Then his lips find my ear, "We'll talk about this later as I punish the fuck out of you."

"Whatever." I sound unaffected when my thighs are smeared with arousal.

"No one else?" Nikolai toys with his empty shot glass, then hums and retrieves a cigarette, letting it hang at the corner of his lips. "Fucking bore. I'm out of here."

He lights his cigarette on his way to the exit.

"Phew, that was intense." Annika breathes. "Seriously, Kill. Don't bring him next time. He's scary."

"Are you sure it's not because he can snitch to your brother?"

She laughs awkwardly. "Don't be ridiculous. I have nothing to hide from Jer."

"Uh-huh," Killian says with clear mockery.

"So who's next?" Bran speaks, his voice sounding hoarse.

"Me!" Annika glares at Killian. "Never have I ever got my dick sucked."

"That's a low fucking blow." Remi drinks and so do Bran and Killian.

Too much info about my brother.

Note to self, never play these games with him around.

"Wait a minute." Remi stares at Creigh. "Why aren't you drinking, Cray Cray? Have you missed the never have I ever for this round?" When he shakes his head, Remi seems exasperated. "Then drink—Jesus fucking Christ, spawn, please tell me you've had your dick sucked at least once?"

When Creigh remains silent, Remi falls down on his chair dramatically. "I think I need some medical attention. My own spawn has been missing out and I didn't know. I'm losing years of my life as we speak, I'm telling you."

"What's so special about having one's dick sucked?" Creighton speaks his longest sentence for the evening.

"Uh, what's so special about the sun? The moon? The ecosystem? I can go on forever." Remi sighs. "Jesus, spawn, you're making me look like a bad mentor."

"You are, though." Cecily makes a face at him and he makes one back.

"Proud of you, cousin," I tell Creigh and he nods. "I'll drink to you."

Before I even grab the glass, Killian snatches and downs it on my behalf.

His lips glisten with the alcohol and I think something is wrong with my heart, because it keeps beating so hard when he side-eyes me and whispers in a deep, low tone, "Behave."

"I thought you wanted me to be a bad girl," I murmur back.

"I want you to be just the way you are. Minus the drinking."

"Cherry said you need someone like you so they can understand you better."

He raises a brow. "And what did you tell her?"

"To go shove it where no one can see. Well, not exactly, but I wish I'd said that."

He chuckles. "I like it when you're jealous."

"Hey, you two lovebirds, we're playing here." Ava slaps the table. "Can't believe quiet Glyndon is the first one to be in a relationship among us."

"Hey! I've been in countless relationships," Remi says.

"You don't count."

"Hey, Remi," Killian calls, obviously on a nickname basis with my friends.

"What's up, Kill?"

"Tell us a joke."

"Oooh, what's with the peer pressure all of a sudden? I have stage fright. Just kidding. Why do you need the joke? To brag to your friends? Sorry mate, I have to be credited."

"I just wanted to see how funny you are since someone said you're *hilarious*." I don't miss how he enunciates the last word.

Remi completely misses that, though. "That someone has delectable taste. Oh, here's one. What did one butt cheek say to the other?"

Cecily rolls her eyes. "What?"

"Together, we can stop this shit."

Annika, Ava, Brandon, and I burst out laughing. Creighton smiles a little, and Cecily throws a lemon at him, but can't stop her grin. "You clown piece of shit."

"Haha, you bitches love me. If it weren't for my lordship, you'd be living a boring life."

"See?" I tell Killian as they all talk at the same time.

"It's not *that* funny."

"Oh, please, you're just being a twat."

"Careful, baby. You're pushing it."

I flip my hair and lean on my palm to stare at him. "You're going to punish me anyway, so might as well push you as much as I want."

"When did you learn to be a pain in the ass?"

I stroke his cheek. "After I met you."

I can feel his jaw clenching beneath my fingers. "You're never getting drunk again and speaking in that erotic voice in public."

My head falls back with a laugh, and he doesn't let me finish as he abruptly stands and picks me up in his arms. "Glyndon's had too much to drink. I'm taking her back. She'll spend the night with me."

"Nooo, I want to staaay."

But my words are unheard as he walks out of the pub. I sulk, then I grab him by the hair. "Taking me back, my arse. You just want to fuck me, you perverted, sadistic bloody wanker."

"Glad you got that off your chest. We're going to have a long night."

I laugh because I don't want to cry. "When will you get tired of fucking me?"

"I'm not sure, but probably never."

He opens the passenger door of his new car, another custom red Aston Martin that his grandpa bought him, and puts me inside, then fastens my seatbelt, his face inches away from mine.

"What if I start to have feelings for you, what happens then?" I whisper, and I can actually hear the sound of my heart splitting in two. It's haunting in the dark, freezing, and absolutely horrifying.

"Why does something need to happen?"

"Because that's how relationships work. There need to be feelings."

"I already feel a lot for you. Right now, it's fucking annoyance and anger for letting them see you like this."

"You know that's not what I'm asking for."

"Then what are you asking for, Glyndon?"

I stare in the opposite direction, a tear sliding down my cheek. "Something you don't have."

"Don't give me that." He forces me to stare at him, his fingers digging in my chin. "And don't you ever use that fucking argument with me."

"Then if I ask for your heart, will you give it? Of course you won't. You don't have it. All your emotions are learned, right? So even if you say you like me, you adore me, you love me, I'll never believe them, because you don't believe them either. You say I love you to your mum all the time, but you told me it's just to placate her. You've never felt what love is. You don't *know* what love is."

His nostrils flare. It's anger, it's rage, but it's not for the right reasons. "I'm giving you more than I've given anyone in my life, Glyndon. I'm giving you monogamy, dates that I usually don't give a fuck about, and I'm even entertaining your friends and family."

I'm sparing your brother, and choosing not to fight against your cousin, no matter how much he provokes me. I'm being fucking patient with your irritating fights and denials and dramatics. I told you that my tolerance and nice phases don't come naturally. Not even a little, not even fucking close. So be grateful, take what I'm offering, and stop being fucking difficult every step of the way."

I can't control the tear that flows down my other cheek. "What you're giving me isn't enough."

"Glyndon," he grinds out.

I close my eyes. "I want to go home."

"Open your fucking eyes."

I do, though after a while, I repeat, assertively this time, "I want to go home."

His jaw clenches, but he slowly releases me and goes to driver's side.

I fall asleep with tears in my eyes and a shard of pain in my soul.

But the truth of the matter is, I should only blame myself for having feelings for a psycho.

A hand pats my shoulder and I wake up, thinking we've arrived at the dorm. Instead, we're in front of a plane.

Maybe I drank too much or I'm imagining we're in the airport.

Killian appears at my door, his face closed, looking like a dark lord with a taste for little girls. "Time to go."

"Go where?" I ask, half-spooked, half-drunk.

His index finger taps the door. "Home."

KILLIAN

"Tell me you're kidding."

"I'm not sober enough for your games, Killian."

"We're really flying. Oh my God, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm calling the police. Can we call the police from the air? Hello, officer, I'm being kidnapped by a crazy psycho."

"I can't believe Annika gave you my passport. You threatened her, didn't you?"

"I don't even like flying. It's scary. I didn't call Grandpa first. What if I never talk to him again?"

"If I die, I'll turn into a scary ghost and haunt the hell out of you, prick. I'll live in your nightmares."

"Gareth, do something!"

That, in a nutshell, was the word vomit Glyndon graced us with during the flight. Her sense of panic grew with every minute and so did her imagination.

I had to stop her after she asked Gareth for help. Because fuck that guy.

He should've chosen not to join us. So what if he was supposed to go back home on his own and even asked Nikolai for his private jet? And yes, I might have hijacked his flight, but still, he goes back all the time. He could've let us have the plane all to ourselves.

The jet is spacious enough to fit a small army with all their equipment. The comfortable chairs are made of high-quality leather and are spacious enough to fit two people.

Uncle Kyle bought this baby as a gift for Aunt Rai on one of their anniversaries, and Nikolai kinds of steals it whenever he needs to fly home—and Gareth, in retrospect.

Not me, because I only go back to the States in the summer.

Knowing his presence is unwanted, Gareth lounges on a seat by the window a few rows ahead of us, buds in ear and a tablet in hand.

I'm by the window while Glyndon is beside me, her pupils dilated and her lips puffed out and parted. But since she's a slippery rabbit, she still cranes her head to watch the scenery, despite her obvious aerophobia.

She's been stiff, had multiple freak-out sessions, and drove herself to the point of panic in only the half hour since we departed. And while focusing on her has been dulling my thoughts about where we're going, I don't like seeing her like this.

The good thing is that the fear and a cup of coffee have sobered her up a little.

She's still a bit drunk, judging by the slow blinking and the glittering in her bright green eyes.

"Stop looking out the window if you're so scared."

"What if we fall, like nosedive straight into the ocean. We'll all die, be eaten by sharks, and they might never find us. It'll hurt so bad."

"Actually no, we're over twenty thousand feet up, so if we do fall from this height, the g-force of it will black us out in about twenty seconds. The good news is, you'll feel nothing. Bad news, there will be no remains to recuperate since the power of the crash will disintegrate us and the body of the plane."

She finally wrenches her attention from the window to stare at me as if I murdered her favorite puppy. "Was that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Depends on whether or not you stop thinking we'll crash. Those aren't really common."

"But they happen."

"Then think of this as your last battle cry. Wanna have one final fuck?"

"You're not funny." She swallows. "Flights really make me nervous. It's why I make Cecily and Ava drive with me all the way

from London to the island."

"That's because your head is in the wrong place. Instead of focusing on the crash and the plane, you need to occupy your time with something else."

"Like what?"

"Get on my lap."

"I'm not in the mood for sex, Killian."

"I won't fuck you."

"Really?"

"Really. Gareth could hear your loud sounds of pleasure and then I'd have to throw him out of the plane. So come here."

She hesitates for a beat before she stands up, then stops. "You just said it. Gareth is right there."

"Doesn't mean I can't touch you." I grab her wrist and pull her so her legs are spread out on my thighs.

Then I wrap my arms around her middle, stroking the skin beneath her top in slow circles.

She stares at me for a beat, her breathing slowly calming down. So I kiss her forehead, enjoying the shiver that goes through her body.

"Better?"

"Yeah." She sulks. "But I still don't want to talk to you."

"You can still use my body heat to calm down."

"You'd allow yourself to be used?"

"By you? Absolutely." And I mean that shit. If this woman asks me to cut my chest open and show her the organ she's asked for, I'd rip it from its tendons and lay it at her feet.

All the other bullshit she asked for won't be happening, though.

It's simply impossible.

Her neck reddens, and I swear she's blushing, probably touched, but then she lets her loathsome mouth take over. "Still doesn't give you the right to kidnap me."

"Didn't you want more from me? I'm taking you to meet my parents."

Her gaze strays sideways, and I hate it when she breaks eye contact. I have to see her all the time, and she's never shied away

from me, so when she breaks our connection, I feel a weird sense of loss.

As if feeling the change, her gaze slowly meets mine again. "How many have you tried this trick on?"

"You're the first."

"Am I supposed to feel special that I beat all the girls—and apparently *boys*?"

"Five out of five highly recommended, and don't be homophobic. Doesn't look well with the rest of your morals."

"Homophobia has nothing to do with this. I'm just thinking if maybe I'll find you with a man or a woman in bed in the future."

"Probably both at the same time." When she pales, I add. "That was a joke."

"I thought you don't joke."

"I do with you."

She places a hand on my shoulder, probably for balance, but I choose to think that she also wants to be touching me in some way—the way I am with her.

"Are you bisexual?"

"Nikolai is."

"And you? Are you attracted to men?"

"Not really. I was attracted to any holes available. Gender didn't matter."

"Was?"

"It's been months since I didn't care for sex in general, whether with men or women. They were all getting repetitive, bland, and painfully dull."

"Until you found me," she whispers.

"Until I found you. On the top of that cliff, you looked so innocent and naive, I wanted to tarnish you in some way, ruin that apparent innocence and see what was behind it."

"Aren't you the romantic one?"

"You think?"

"I give up." She releases a sigh. "I obviously can't win with you."

If only she knew how wrong that statement is. It's more like I haven't been able to win ever since she came into my life.

My fingers thread in her hair and she closes her eyes, not wanting to enjoy the strokes, but doing so anyway.

"You don't smoke anymore," she announces out of the blue.

"I said I'd quit if you'd keep my lips and hands occupied, and I keep my word, baby."

"You...really quit because of me?"

"Sure did. Second-hand smoke is a serious threat to your health."

"You're more of a serious threat to my health."

"Too bad you can't quit me."

"You never know. Maybe one day I'll find a better man."

"I'm the only man you'll have, so get used to it and stop provoking me." I stroke her hair. "Go to sleep, little rabbit. We have about seven hours to land."

One more reason why I don't go home.

I expect her to fight, but she bends her legs so they're on my lap and rests her head on my chest.

It's one of the few times she's let go without starting drama about being in my company. She says that she wants more, but how can she not see that I've been fighting more battles than I signed up for ever since she came along?

"It's unfair that you feel so safe," she grumbles as her body relaxes in my hold, and her breaths even out as she falls into a slumber. My nose strokes her hair, breathing in the raspberries mixed with alcohol and I also let myself fall asleep.

Because she feels safe, too.

THE ECHO OF VOICES SWIRLS AROUND MY HEAD LIKE THE BUZZING OF BEES.

"Jesus Christ, Glyndon. That's not how you're supposed to do it."

My eyes fly open and the first thing I notice is that the weight on top of me is gone and I'm hugging a pillow instead.

Real smooth.

That little rabbit must've put the pillow there so I wouldn't feel the emptiness and wake up right away.

But that's not the emergency here. It's Gareth groaning while calling Glyndon's name.

I lift my head and I have no fucking clue what to name the fucking feeling when I find them sitting around a table a few seats ahead, playing fucking Uno.

But I know it's too similar to damn relief.

This isn't even funny anymore. I'm constantly on the edge of murder because of this woman, and the worst part is that she's the one who's stopping my demons from acting out.

The screen over my seat indicates that we have about three more hours to land.

"You didn't tell me about this rule before." She clutches the cards close to her chest. "You can't just invent new ones."

"I'm not inventing." He shows her the rules card. "It's right here."

"Uh, how about a no? You're cheating!"

"Because you're losing?"

"I could totally win if you didn't start inventing rules left and right."

"For the millionth time, they're right here. Just admit defeat and move on. Where's your sports spirit?"

"Not in the building. Sorry, I mean freaking plane. Come on, just roll with it, would you?"

He smiles, and I clench my fists, and it's due to a lot of reasons. The first is that I thought he'd forgotten how to actually smile without faking it.

Oh, and how fucking comfortable Glyndon is in his presence.

He of all people must've realized that she's my weakness now, the spot he can hit to get to me, and knowing Gareth, he will. Without mercy.

Not that I blame him, but I would impale him before he could even lay a finger on her.

Forcing my agitation down, I walk toward them with the nonchalance of a bored demon.

I sit on Glyndon's armrest and plant a hand on her shoulder. "What are we playing?"

Gareth starts to lower his cards. "I'll leave you guys to it."

That's right, big bro. Take a fucking hike.

"Oh, don't be silly," she tells him. "You don't need to leave just because Killian is here. Let's continue."

This little—

"And you go sit on a chair and don't spy on my cards." She hides them against her chest, glaring up at me like a mama bear.

Hmm. Now, I'm wondering why I didn't strap her to me earlier.

Gareth keeps his cards, and I have no choice but to take the seat next to Glyn, because I'm sure as fuck going to play and beat these two.

They end up ganging up on me, cheating and using every trick under the sun to make me lose.

But I'm the founder of the ethically black school they tried to enroll in, so I end up winning anyway. Three times in a row.

Glyndon throws her cards on the small table. "Ugh, this is no fun. Do you have to win every round?"

"How else would he be a dickhead?"

"Don't be sore losers, doesn't look nice." I grin.

"Oh, screw you." She releases a breath. "We should play a round just the two of us, Gareth."

"Request denied," I say.

"Well, you just keep winning. The game becomes boring that way."

"Never mind him. Killer just doesn't physically recognize the term *holding back*, especially when he's jealous. This is him being territorial to prove a point."

"I'm going to kill you," I mouth, and he just smiles, a fake-ass one.

"Seriously?" Glyndon glares at me. "You're being a complete bloody wanker for some baseless jealousy?"

"We'll see how baseless it is when my dear big bro is floating in the air."

"Stop threatening people's lives just because you can, Killian. And this is your brother, so how about you treat him as such instead of like some enemy?" She points a finger at me. "Also, either you play normally or you'll lose all privileges to ever play with us."

I consider whether I want to kiss the fuck out of her or choke her right now. Probably both at the same time.

Gareth raises a brow. "Looks like you've finally met your match. Mom and Dad will love her."

"Are you sure?" Glyndon gathers the cards, her tone awkward. "He didn't tell me beforehand, so I couldn't even change into appropriate clothes."

"What's wrong with your current clothes?" I steal a switch card, because no, I'm definitely not letting them win anytime soon.

"You don't get opinion rights." She makes a face, then grabs my hand, reaches under my sleeve, and snatches back the card I stole. "And no cheating. Seriously, can't you take a chill pill?"

"I do, when I'm fucking your brains out. Wanna go to the bathroom?"

"Too much information," Gareth says.

"You can always leave, and go back to your nerdy activities."

"No and no, and did I mention no?" Glyndon says in a mocking voice even though her neck is red. "Now, let's play."

Gareth manages to win once, only because Glyndon actually searched my pants for the stolen cards.

To say she's become bold is an understatement. And it's definitely not because I'm taking it easy on her.

She's just growing more into herself and into this wrecking force that's coming after my life.

By the time we prepare to land, she manages to win and rubs it in our faces and gloats until we think she'll do it till kingdom come.

"Feels good to be a winner." She fastens her seatbelt at the flight attendant's call.

I tighten it further around her waist. "You actually won the least between the three of us and only because you stole more cards than we could."

"I'm sorry, what? I can't hear you over the victory fireworks in my head."

I chuckle, shaking my head. "Stop being adorable before I fuck you right here, right now."

"Don't do that," she whisper-yells. "Ugh. I can't stop remembering that many airplane crashes happened while trying to land."

"Then I guess you should hold my hand, hmm?" I offer her my palm and she takes it, threading her fingers through mine and tucking it in her lap.

Full-blown satisfaction fills my system at the thought of being her anchor.

It isn't some Prince Charming, a boring type, or another man.

Me.

The feeling of complete euphoria slowly dulls down with the reminder of where we're going.

Fucking home.

IT'S STRANGE HOW THE MIND CATEGORIZES EVENTS AND SHOVES THEM INTO boxes of archives. Some are forgotten after a day or a week.

Others stay there forever. In fact, they slip into subconsciousness and make sure they're never forgotten.

My family home on the outskirts of New York City is a modern mansion that could tick the dream house checklist of most Americans. It even has the white fence cliché my mother probably dreamt of when she was young.

It's huge, personalized to the smallest detail, and fit to be the home of Asher and Reina Carson. As in, the American king and queen who instantly become the talk of every media outlet the moment they're in public.

In this house, I've had everything people would consider happy memories. A loving mother, a present father—more than need be—birthday parties, running around like headless chickens with Gareth, Nikolai, Mia, and Maya.

And my awakening by hunting and killing those mice.

People tend to romanticize the past, I don't. Because those memories? They're nothing more than yellowed pages in an old forgotten book.

The only thing I remember from this house is Mom's terrified expression, Dad's frown, and eventually his 'we shouldn't have had Killian' and 'he's defective' words.

Leaving for college was the best thing that ever happened to me. I needed to stay out of Dad's orbit, away from the constant

ticking bomb that goes off in my head whenever he's in sight.

So the last place I want to be in is his house.

But since I'm proving a point to the infuriating little shit Glyndon, here we fucking go.

She remains a step behind us, getting distracted by watching the house with her inquisitive eyes.

And yes, she definitely made us stop by a shop so she could change into a floral dress, smooth her hair and makeup, and buy a gift.

"My parents taught me to never go into someone's home empty-handed," she said when I told her the gift was unnecessary.

A small sound of *tap, tap* reaches us first before a model-like woman with the shiniest blonde hair appears, coming down the stairs.

Mom's smile is the most contagious thing I've ever seen. Usually, other people's emotions don't matter to me. Yes, I can discern them, can even understand them when their owners can't, but I don't give a fuck about them.

Reina Ellis Carson is the exception to that.

And now, Glyndon is, too.

Mom wraps both Gareth and me in a hug, her head resting on our shoulders. She's shorter than us, so we have to lower ourselves to pat her back so she doesn't have to strain, or worse, dangle between us.

No kidding, she did that once.

"I missed you so much!" She pulls back to run her hand over our bodies. "Let me look at you. Did you get taller or what? I can't believe this. Next time, I'll get a staircase to reach you. Ahh, my boys are back home together. I couldn't believe it when Gareth told me earlier."

She hugs us again and I share a look with my brother.

Here we go again.

After basically strangling us for five minutes, she finally notices Glyndon, who has tried her best to remain in the background during Mom's welcome home ceremony.

I didn't think it possible, but Mom's expression brightens further. "And you are?"

"Hello. My name is Glyndon." She offers her a wrapped present. "Thank you for having me."

"Oh, thank you. You're so sweet and well-mannered." Mom accepts her present. "You're with..."

"Me." I wrap an arm around her waist and bring her to my side. "She's my girl."

"The one who got your lips bruised the other time?"

"The one and only." It wasn't due to making out, but I was that way because of a fight I did for her, so it counts.

"W-what?" Glyndon asks with enough awkwardness to redden her neck.

"It's nothing." Mom feigns innocence. "I'm so glad Killian is finally bringing someone home. I thought he'd die alone. Don't get me wrong, I know he sleeps around, but it's never just one person and I was worried it'd come back and bite him in the ass."

"Mom!" I throw a questioning hand up.

"What? You know you're allergic to monogamy. Or *were* before you met this beautiful young lady." Her expression becomes serious. "If he gives you trouble, let me know and I will use my mother's privileges to knock some sense into his head."

"Thanks, I'll definitely do that."

"So you're ganging up on me now? Traitors, both of you."

Mom just flips her hair. "We girls have to stick up for each other, right, Glyn? Can I call you Glyn?"

"Yeah, sure. And I agree about sticking up for each other."

"Dad."

My good mood slowly dissipates as Gareth closes the distance to the stairs and meets Dad for a bro hug.

Sometimes, I like to think of him as my stepfather. The man who married Mom and fathered Gareth, but he doesn't give a shit about the other man's son—me.

Of course, it's all imaginary, because I sure as shit did a DNA test to make sure we are, in fact, related by blood and genetics. Unfortunately, Mom loves the man too much to cheat on him.

He's dressed in a dark gray suit that highlights his physique, even at his age. And yes, he probably was out working on a Saturday again, even though he usually thinks weekends are a sacred time for his family.

His dark hair is styled with some white peeking out at the sides. Other than that, he's definitely aging well. Better than Grandpa, that's for sure.

After hugging his favorite son, he nods at me. "Kill."

I nod back. "Dad."

"To what do we owe this visit?" he asks with little to no emotion.

I wonder if I'll be like him when I grow up. Completely blank and cold to the point of icing the whole atmosphere.

Or maybe I'm doing it just fine at my current age.

"Didn't you say to come over next time Gareth does?" I match his tone. "I'm over."

"Watch it," he warns, his voice nonnegotiable.

That's where he's different from Gareth. My brother either avoids or ignores my provocations, Dad doesn't allow a single one of them.

Not even a hint of passive aggressiveness.

Mom smiles in a poor attempt to kill the tension permeating the air. "Ash, look who Kill brought over. His girlfriend."

"Hi, I'm Glyndon," she says with more awkwardness than when she was introducing herself to Mom. And maybe, just maybe, she can feel the tension radiating off me.

"You look familiar..." Dad trails off. "You don't happen to be a King, do you?"

"I am." She smiles a little, some of the tension withering away. "My dad's name is Levi King."

"How are you related to Aiden?"

"He's my uncle. Well, technically, he's Dad's cousin, but we've always considered him an uncle."

"I see." He remains silent for a bit. "You seem like a good person, so I don't see why you're with my son. Unless he threatened you?"

"Asher!" Mom's cheeks redden and any attempts to salvage this fucked-up family gathering fly out the window.

"You know he's very well capable of that. I will not have an innocent girl from a prestigious family caught in his web and not do something about it."

Gareth frowns, probably hating that I came with him. It couldn't be because of what his role model said.

I take a step forward, ready to have the showdown Dad and I should've had a long time ago. I don't even think about how Mom will be devastated. I'll console her later.

But Glyndon clutches my hand in hers and threads our fingers together. Her voice is clear when she speaks. "He didn't threaten me. I want to be with him, and I did have a chance to leave him when my brother intervened, but I chose not to."

My chest tightens and I don't know what type of feeling this is. All I know is that want to kiss the fuck out of her.

"Are you sure that's the wisest choice?" Dad continues as if he's grilling the opposition in court.

"Asher, enough." Mom uses her stern voice. "It's such a rare occurrence to have Kill home and we are not going to turn this into an argument." She beams at Glyndon. "You guys must be tired and hungry. How about you rest while I make lunch?"

"No, please let me help." Glyndon gives me a reassuring glance, then her fingers release mine and she leaves with Mom.

"We'll talk later," Dad tells me under his breath before he and Gareth follow after them.

I predicted this, but now, I'm sure.

I fucking hate home.

GLYNDON

To say the atmosphere is intense during lunch and dinner would be an understatement.

I always wondered what type of parents someone like Killian would have. I would've thought maybe one of them would be like him, because I read somewhere that psychopathy is genetic and, therefore, can be hereditary.

But I wouldn't call his parents psychopathic at all. In fact, Reina—that's what she insisted I call her—has been nothing short of lovely. She reminds me of Aunt Silver—Ava's mother. She just has elegant extroverted energy and a natural talent for making everyone around her feel at ease.

You can see in her eyes the amount of care and absolute adoration she has for her husband and children.

It's Mr. Carson who's a bit reserved, but not in a cold way. I think he's more like Gareth—there needs to be a lot of interactions before he warms up to you enough to allow you close.

During dinner, Reina asks about school and is impressed when I tell her I study art. Then, she recounts that one time she auctioned one of Mum's paintings for a charity.

Of course she did.

Killian swiftly intervenes, as if he knows I'm getting uncomfortable, and shows her my Instagram for some of the paintings I've posted.

I want to hide beneath the table.

"This is...different." She traces the rim of her wine glass while going through every post. "In a unique way. You and your mother

don't even have the same style. This is refreshing."

I swallow a piece of meatball. "Really?"

"Yes, anyone who understands some art can see that. Though, I'm nothing more than an amateur who buys beautiful things." She laughs.

"No, you're right." I release a breath. "Mum said that when I was about nine, but I didn't listen."

And I kept holding a secret grudge against her because I thought she didn't pass me down the right genes.

"You are different from your brothers, Glyn. Bran is day, Lan is night. You're more special because you're a mixture of both."

Those were her words and I stubbornly put them on the backburner.

I need to talk to Mum later. It's long overdue.

"I'm glad you can finally listen," she says. "Not like these two. They never listen to me. I should've had girls."

"You're never going to let us live down the fact that neither of us is a girl, are you?" Gareth asks.

"Well, no. Rai has the most perfect twin girls and I don't."

"You're right, Mom. Kill should've been a girl."

"Why not you, big bro?"

"Because you looked cute as shit in that tiny dress as a baby."

"Mom!" Killian slams his utensils on the table. "We said we were never talking about this."

"Talking about what?" I ask, curious as hell.

"Well, see..." Gareth starts.

"Don't you dare," Killian warns.

"Leave it be, Gaz." Mr. Carson says.

"Oh, she can find out. After all, she's the only one Kill has brought home. So, Glyn, it's not a secret that I wanted a girl with everything in me, so when I found out I was pregnant, I bought all sorts of tiny girl clothes and cute dresses for a newborn. I didn't go to find out the gender, because I was so sure it would be a girl this time. Needless to say, Killian was born. I only had girl clothes for my trip to the clinic, so I had to dress him in one. I swear it was only that once, and I had to commemorate the moment and bury my 'mother of girls' dream with it. But Gareth

found the picture later on and just wouldn't shut up about it. Seriously, leave your baby brother alone."

"Baby? Please tell me you're kidding." Rare amusement coats Gareth's words. "You should've seen the picture before he burned it, Glyn. Kill looked like a beautiful princess."

I can't help the suppressed laughter that shakes my shoulder at the thought of Killian in a dress.

He, however, seems extremely displeased with this conversation since he glares at both his brother and mother while tapping a finger on the table.

"You feel accomplished or something?" he asks his brother.

Gareth raises a brow. "*Very.*"

The dinner continues to be lighthearted, fun, yet a bit tense whenever any words are exchanged between Killian and his father.

But I like him with his family. From the outside looking in, he's not any different from normal and I think that's the scariest thing about Killian.

Maybe it's the saddest, too. Because all of his actions and words are learned behavior he perfected to keep his mother happy.

Will I be like her in the future? Completely oblivious to the signs and to how none of Killian's actions or words are coming from inside him?

Will I be happy just having him around?

After dinner, we watch a family movie and Reina keeps bringing us all sorts of snacks.

She ends up falling asleep halfway through, and Mr. Carson carries her in his arms without saying a word to the rest of us.

As soon as they disappear up the stairs, Killian takes my hand. "Let's go."

"But the film isn't over."

"Fuck the film. You can watch it later."

"Killian," I whisper-yell. "We're in your parents' house."

"So? They have sex all the time. They're probably in the middle of it as we speak."

Gareth throws a pillow at his head. "Thanks for the image, motherfucker."

Killian throws it back. Harder. "How do you think you came to life, sunshine? By shitting rainbows?" He tugs on my hand. "We're leaving. Now."

I give Gareth an apologetic glance and let Killian take me up the stairs.

"You know, we could've stayed a little and finished the film like normal people before you started thinking with your dick," I say as we reach what I suppose is his room.

It looks like a copy of the one in the Heathens' mansion, but there's a full-length mirror on the opposite wall with some American football awards on each side.

I can't help the urge to check that part of him. It's strange how much I like discovering these things about him.

He once told me that football—American—helped him with his impulse control, but that's about it.

Like everything in his life, he never cares about anything too deeply.

Even medicine seems like a stepping stone to him, but at least it's one he actually enjoys.

Killian kicks the door shut behind him. "Good to know your sense of sarcasm could be upgraded. Also, I'm calling bullshit on the normal people part. If you were normal, you wouldn't get off on being roughened up like a little dirty whore."

My cheeks heat as I release an award and face him. "Killian!"

"What?"

"Can you not?"

"Not what?"

"Call me a whore outside of sex, you perverted prick."

"Let's get you naked first and then I'll consider it."

"I want to sketch something first."

"Do it after."

"No, I have grasp it now before it escapes me. I'll sketch it real quick and redraw it later."

"What is *it*?"

"I only have a feeling, so I won't know for certain until I put it to paper." I grin. "I'm weird and different like that."

"Is it possibly a nude?"

"I don't usually do those."

"Usually?"

"I do them in class sometimes."

"I need to have a word with your college so they'll ban you from drawing naked people."

"Stop it, you tyrant." I can't help but laugh. "You don't see me moaning about you touching patients and seeing them naked."

"That's different. They're patients."

"And this is art."

"I still don't like it."

"You'll get used to it."

"Start convincing me then."

"What?"

"Didn't you say you want to sketch?" He retrieves a big stack of big white paper from the drawer and fishes out a mechanical pencil and tosses them on the rug opposite a huge mirror. "Sketch."

I sit cross-legged on the floor and narrow my eyes on him. "Does that mean you'll wait until I finish?"

"You know I'm not a patient man. At least, not when it comes to you." He kneels behind me and meets my gaze in the mirror, his dark and harsh like the worst storm from the hurricane season. His finger grabs hold of the strap of my dress and slides it down my arm. "How about we both do our thing?"

"I'm not going to sketch while you're touching me." My voice becomes low, definitely laced with arousal.

"That wasn't a request, Glyndon. Either we do this while you're sketching or without it. Either would work with me."

"You damn dictator." I glare at him through the mirror. "I'm going to pretend you're not there."

A low chuckle fills the room. "By all means. I'd love to see you try."

I smooth a page, fully intent on ignoring the hell out of him as I let the mechanical pencil slide over the page in continuous, condensed strokes.

In my peripheral vision, I catch Killian smirking at me in the mirror as he pulls his shirt over his head and throws it to the side, then follows with his trousers and boxers.

My hand falters on the paper and his smirk widens as he stands in full view beside my body in front of the mirror.

"Like what you see, baby?"

The bastard knows how cruelly beautiful he is and doesn't hesitate to use the fact as a weapon.

But I refuse to stare at or admire him right now. For once, he won't have his way.

He reaches a hand to my hair and I think he'll tug me back by it because he doesn't like to be ignored, but he merely strokes it. "Did you know that the first time I saw you, I wanted to grab you by this hair as you choked on my cock?"

I purse my lips and continue sketching, not even knowing where I'm going with this.

He kneels behind me and slides a hand to my throat. "I also wanted to grab this delicate pulse and feel it beneath my fingers, knowing that I have the power to weaken and then eventually put it to halt...like right now."

My heart comes to a thudding stop before it resurrects back to life as he squeezes. I meet his eyes in the mirror, mine bulging, his dark.

"Oh, look at that. I finally have your attention." He relaxes his hold enough to allow me air as his other hand glides the other strap over my shoulder. "I also thought about ripping your clothes off and claiming you then and there."

He bunches a fistful of my dress in his hand from behind and pulls with savage strength that rips it, letting it fall to shreds around us. "Like that."

"K-Killian..."

"Shh, focus on sketching."

My fingers twitch and I let the pencil bleed on the paper in a symphony of chaos that matches my insides.

He uses the chance to unclasp my bra, letting my aching breasts bounce free.

I brace myself for the pinch of my sensitive nipple, but he gently cups my breast, eliciting an erotic shudder from deep within my soul.

"I didn't touch your tits that day, remember? But these nipples were hard, peeking from beneath that shirt, begging to be fucked

as ruthlessly as your mouth.”

I shake my head, but he squeezes my nipple and I gasp as the jab of pleasure zaps straight to my core.

“Lies.” He pinches again and again, until I’m about to double over and tears gather in my eyes. “Look at you moaning and crying at the same time. Pick one, my little slut.”

“Fuck you.”

His erection stabs at my underwear-covered arse and he groans. “We’ll get to that in a bit. But we need to settle something first.”

He continues the rhythm of pinching my nipples, alternating between the two until my vision blurs and I’m ready to beg him to stop.

For some reason, I don’t.

For some reason, this part of him ticks all of my twisted boxes.

“Now, my little rabbit, you might act like you hate that night and me all you like, but it’s a fact that you got turned on by having your will confiscated. I saw it in your glittering eyes and shaky limbs. I saw it in your hard nipples and rosy cheeks. I bet you didn’t understand it yourself, but lucky for you, I can.”

“That’s not true,” I choke out, my voice so lustful, it’s shameful.

“More lies.” He releases my nipple and slides a hand down to my underwear, groaning. “I bet you were as soaked as you are right now. You were disappointed I didn’t take your virginity like a caveman, weren’t you? Bet you thought about it all night long, too.”

Before I can even fathom his words, he lifts me up by his hold on my throat so that I’m kneeling and he’s right behind me.

“Don’t stop sketching.”

“Killian…”

“Sketch.” His order makes me shake, but I let my hand do its thing while I’m unable to stare away from the mirror.

He rids me of my knickers so we’re both completely nude, then cups my core. “Bet this little cunt felt left out as I was stuffing your mouth with my cock. We have to make it up to her, don’t you think? Open your legs the widest you can.”

It's hard in this position, but I try to and he slips his cock against my opening. I bite my lower lip in preparation for the penetration, but he only glides his erection against my folds.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

I'm about to come from the friction alone, but it's not enough. I've come to realize that while I love waking up with his lips on my core or how he casually fingers me to orgasm during car rides, I love it tenfold better when his cock is wrecking me from the inside out.

I'm never going to admit this, but I also love waking up or going to sleep with his cock inside me.

He's usually quick to get to that part, but obviously not today. He keeps rubbing his cock over my sensitive folds, my clit, my entrance, but he never thrusts in.

"Killian, please..."

"Please what?"

"Put it in..."

"Look at you being so fucking adorable and begging for it. Weren't you supposed to be sketching?"

"Put it in," I demand this time, wiggling my hips so I can catch the crown.

"We'll play a game before that."

"This isn't the time for games."

"It sure as fuck is. So, my little rabbit. I want you to admit to one of two things. The first is the obvious statement of being mine. The second is that you wanted me that first time."

I glare at him through the mirror. "No."

Slap.

I gasp as the sting registers on my core and spreads to my whole body.

Holy shit. Did the bastard just spank my pussy?

He did, and the sting hurts so good, I think I came a little. What the hell is wrong with me?

"We'll try again. Say one."

"I didn't want you, are you crazy?" I snarl.

"Then say you're mine."

"No."

Slap. Slap. Slap.

A broken sob mixed with a moan echoes in the air and I realize it's mine as the orgasm threatens to hold me hostage.

"You're dripping all over my hand and the carpet, baby. Maybe we should change the punishment method if you're enjoying it a bit too much. Now, say one."

I'm panting as I meet his gaze in the mirror, then slowly lower my head and shake it.

This time, the slaps go for so long that I think I'll black out from the mixture of pleasure and pain.

"Fucking say it, Glyndon."

"I wanted you," I cry. "I don't understand why, but I wanted you, you fucking bastard."

"There." His voice turns darker as he thrusts inside me slow but deep, and it's enough to throw me over the edge.

My gasps and moans mix together in a symphony of pleasure, one that doesn't come close to matching his own chaotic violence.

He'll be the death of me.

Literally and figuratively.

"Don't stop sketching, my little rabbit. Show me what those hands can make while you're filled with my cock."

I draw chaotically, with the same rhythm he's fucking me. Deep, raw, and so out of control, I can hardly breathe.

Never would I have thought that sex could be this animalistic, this completely unhinged.

He's ruined me for all sex.

I don't think I'd ever be able to find pleasure if I wasn't choked, thrown down, and properly claimed without me having a say in it.

I don't think I'll ever enjoy this with anyone but Killian.

Because as much as I hate to admit it, I trust him. He likes to hurt me, but he doesn't want to break me.

He always said he wanted my fight, to dominate me, to hold me down and have his way with me, but he also gets off on me enjoying every second of it.

I'm about to come again, I feel it. I can taste in the air with every chopped-off inhale and exhale. My body is tuned to his, to

how he spreads my legs farther and slides my wetness from where we're joined to my back hole.

"What to do, baby? I think your ass is the one feeling left out now. We can't let it miss the fun, no?"

A noise of pleasure is all I can release, because I'm about to fall again. Just when I'm on the edge, he pulls out.

My groan of frustration echoes in the air and the bastard has the audacity to chuckle. "Don't be a greedy little rabbit. We've got to give your ass some love, too."

He pushes me onto all fours, but I'm still holding the pencil on the paper. My core clenches when he parts my arse cheeks and slides two fingers inside. I bite my lip, used to this type of play whenever he's pounding into me. Only, now, he adds a third finger and stretches my back hole until the overload of sensations tear me apart.

His other hand glides my arousal to my arse over and over until I'm writhing and bucking my hips. Just when I think I'll come from how he's stretching me, his fingers are gone.

"This may hurt." His cock slides between my arse cheeks and he drives inside in one go.

I physically jerk forward with a groan, tears spilling on my sketch.

They're relief tears, I realize. I most definitely am broken, because I'm utterly relieved that he didn't take it easy.

And I'm flat out crying now due to the pain and the feeling of being so completely at his mercy that I can't find a way out.

"Shh, relax. Don't push me out." He rolls his hips and does shallow thrusts that re-awaken my earlier arousal. I wiggle my hips, arching my back. "There, that's my fucking girl."

He finds his rhythm and pounds into me with an urgency that touches me to the bone. Every fiber of my being is tuned to him, to his power, to his sheer force.

And I can't escape him, I realize.

What's worse is that I don't think I want to escape.

Maybe, deep down, I never did.

"Your ass feels as good as your cunt, baby. Feel how it's swallowing my cock?" He slides out a little, then thrusts back in. "You belong to me." *Thrust.* "This ass belongs to me." He rams

three fingers in my pussy. "This cunt is also mine." He grabs my jaw and forces his index and middle fingers between my lips. "This mouth was the first to become mine." He forces my jaw up with his remaining fingers so I stare at the mirror, then he pulls me so my back slams against his chest and his teeth bite down on my earlobe before he murmurs in dark words. "Next time you say what I'm offering is not enough, I want you to remember this view. I want you to remember how every part of you is fucking *mine*."

I'm done for.

I don't last.

I can't.

He's filling me up in ways I've never felt before, and it's not only physically. I'm so done for on every other level.

And I'm free.

I look at him in the mirror as the orgasm washes over me.

It's more than an orgasm. It's a wrecking force and I'm being blown to pieces by it.

"Fucking beautiful," he grunts as he throws me back down so my face meets the floor and he grabs me by the hair. "Now, you're going to be real good for me so I can stuff you with my cum, baby."

And then he fucks me on and on until I can't take it anymore, until my gasps become inaudible and my moans fade into low ones.

That's when he comes. All over my arse, then smears it on my thighs and back and everywhere he can reach.

He's marking me, I realize. Every part of me.

"I knew you'd make a masterpiece, little rabbit."

I stare at where he's pointing through my blurry vision and my eyes widen when I see what I've sketched.

Through the blurry lines and harsh shadows, the subject is clear.

It's us. Naked, joined, and absolutely terrifying.

And...we're right, too.

"Yeah." I smile through a haze. "Masterpiece."

I'm about to fall, but he catches me and carries me in his arms. His lips meet my forehead and I'm a goner.

A lone tear slides down my cheek because I know that this type of obsessive and intense connection is the only thing he has to offer.

He'll fuck me, catch me before I fall, and kiss my forehead, but he'll never love me.

And I will always want him to.

ASTRID

An ominous dream wrenches me from a deep sleep.
I wake up drenched in sweat to find myself cocooned by a massive body.

My heartbeat slowly returns to normal as I stare up at my husband's sleeping face and breathe him in.

Subconsciously, I reach out and stroke a few rebellious hairs away from his forehead. It's such a shame that none of our children have this shade of bright blond, except for Glyn's natural balayage.

The terror slowly subsides the more I touch him and sink further in his presence.

I've been with this man for thirty years and he still causes a flutter in my chest and a dip in my stomach.

When I think about that first time I met him—or more accurately, caught his attention—at the party I didn't even want to be at, it feels just like yesterday.

That day ended with my tragic accident, but that was also the beginning of us, and I wouldn't change it for the world.

We've come a long way from the teenagers we once were. Yes, it wasn't always easy, especially with the kids, but as long as he's by my side, I can conquer anything.

Starting with the nightmare that's playing vividly in my head.

My babies were all caught in muddy water, black hands pulling at them from every side as smoke penetrated their orifices.

"You can only save one," a distorted voice said and I screamed.

That's when I woke up.

Slowly, I peel Levi's arm from around my waist, grab my phone, and quietly leave our bedroom.

It's almost six in the morning, so I text the early birds, Lan and Bran, first. Then Glyn—although it'll take her hours to wake up and reply. And I do it separately.

We have a family group chat, but there's a trick I learned early on. My kids are more prone to talk to me if it's private. They have these internal wars where they don't want their siblings to know about their little secrets.

Especially Bran and Glyn. They're more comfortable talking to me and their dad one-on-one.

Astrid: Morning, baby. Is everything okay?

The first reply is immediate.

Brandon: Morning, Mum. Everything's great. Getting ready for my jog.

Astrid: Are you really okay? You know you can talk to me about anything that bothers you or your siblings. I'm here to listen.

The dots appear and disappear, on and on as I pace the length of the hall.

Bran has always been the trickiest, the most silent, and the one more prone to self-destruction. The reason I constantly ask about him isn't because I love him the most, as anyone from the outside would think.

It's more due to the fact that it's been a while since he talked to me, like *really* talked to me, and I feel like he'll slip from between my fingers like sand the moment I don't check on him.

Brandon: Don't be dramatic, Mum. Everything's fine. Gotta go.

My chest deflates with a disappointed breath, but I send him heart emojis.

Astrid: Be safe, okay? I love you.

Brandon: Love you, too, Mum.

I'm still liking his text when another one shows up at the top of my notifications.

Landon: I'm good as the devil and just as handsome. Morning, Mum.

I smile, shaking my head. My oldest will never change.

Astrid: Morning, rascal, and seriously, where do you get all that arrogance?

Landon: Hello? Have you seen your husband? Pretty sure he's behind the genes. Honorary mention to Uncle Aiden.

Astrid: He's your dad. Stop calling him 'your husband.' Now, tell me, is everything okay with your siblings?

Landon: You're more obvious than a rookie MI6 agent. Can't you get your hands on the intel Glyn sends to Grandpa on a daily basis? And yes, I know all about it. The little shit can't spy to save her life.

Astrid: LANDON! DID YOU JUST CALL YOUR SISTER A LITTLE SHIT?

Landon: She is, and the caps are hurting my eyes first thing in the morning. Actually, I can hear your yelling in my ears. Tone it down, Mum.

Astrid: I'm going to pull your ear next time I see you.

Landon: Yikes. I'm not visiting for the foreseeable future.

Landon: And to answer your question, Bran has been acting weird lately—secretive, weird. I'll let you know when I have more info. As for your baby daughter, pride and joy...

He sends a picture in which Glyn sits on some boy's lap in a restaurant, throwing her head back and laughing.

My lips part.

That's the first time I've seen her laugh so freely since her preteens. Since she started distancing herself from us and I had to take her to therapy.

Her eyes shine, reminding me of a younger version of me when I first met Levi.

Astrid: She looks so happy.

Landon: I wouldn't start picking wedding dates if I were you. That's Killian Carson and he's bad fucking news. He has a history of violence in his high school, not to mention the dubious activities he's currently taking part in.

Astrid: Language.

Landon: Is that seriously the only part you focused on? Control your child and make her stop seeing him. She wouldn't listen to me.

Astrid: She's old enough to make her decisions. There will be no controlling involved. Do you hear me?

Landon: You can't be possibly picking her side on this?

Astrid: This is the first time I've seen her so happy in years, Lan, and I'll not allow anyone, you included, to ruin that happiness. Now, promise me you'll leave her alone.

Landon: I bet Dad wouldn't be as enthusiastic as you when he sees that picture. Grandpa, too.

Astrid: I'll deal with them when Glyn is ready to introduce him to us. Now, promise.

Landon: Fine, promise. Don't blame me when that happiness turns to tears, Mum.

I consider what to tell him carefully, but my train of thought is interrupted when the phone's screen lights up with a video call from none other than my youngest.

Putting on my brightest smile, I pick up. "Glyn! I was just thinking about you. What are you doing up so early?"

I pause when I realize she's standing on what seems like a patio that's only lit by garden lights. "Where are you? Why does it look like night?"

She chews on her bottom lip. "Because it is. I'm in New York."

"In *what*?"

She leans closer to the phone. "Keep it down. It's late here, Mum."

"Oh my God, did you get kidnapped? Nod if it's true."

"I can just speak." She chuckles. "And no, I didn't, *technically*."

"Technically?"

"I didn't, I didn't. I just...came here to meet Killian's parents. This is their house." She clears her throat. "Killian is...my boyfriend. I'm sorry it took me a while to tell you."

"It's about time."

"You...you knew?"

"Of course I did. I'm your mother, I know everything."

It's been weeks since I found out Glyndon was in a relationship. Ever since she started to smile more and had this rosy glow in her cheeks. One that she never had before.

But I was patient, respected her boundaries, and waited for her to spill of her own accord.

"Now, tell me about this Killian."

Her expression softens, but it's laced with some sadness. "He makes me feel alive, Mum. I didn't know someone could make me feel alive, as if...as if..."

"You never lived before them?" I finish for her.

She nods, her face adorably shy. "At the same time, I'm not sure if it's safe to fall so hard like this."

"It's never safe to fall, Glyn. You know you might break your bones or lose your life, but you still take the jump anyway, because you trust him to catch you."

"What if he doesn't?"

"Then I'll be the one to break his bones."

"Mum!"

"Fine, fine. On a serious note, it'd be good to find that he's not worthy of your trust early on, so you can move on."

She sighs. "You're right. It's better to find out than to stay in the dark."

"That's right."

"Thanks, Mum, and not only for this...but for everything. And I'm sorry I'm the least talented of your kids." She chokes on the last words.

"Glyndon—"

"No, let me finish. It took me a lot of courage to decide to tell you this, so just hear me out. I knew early on that I was no match for Lan and Bran, and that crushed me, Mum. I couldn't talk to you about it, because I knew you'd placate me. You have to because you're my mother. I think you felt it, too, because you told Dad to build me a separate studio and encouraged me to pick up my brush again. And I love you for trying, but it didn't really work. That inferiority complex drove me to a dangerous edge and I seriously contemplated committing suicide just to end it. I went to a cliff, twice, but I didn't want to do it, Mum, and that's why I can talk about it now. I don't want to be that version of myself anymore. I realize that even if I'm less talented than Lan and Bran, I still matter to you, Dad, Grandpa, Grandma, and everyone. And that's what keeps me going every day. So thank you, Mum, thank you for telling me I'm different, for taking me to therapy,

for waiting for me to come around and talk to you on my own. I needed that."

Tears gather in my eyes and I quickly wipe them with the back of my hands I can't have her see me cry. Not when she finally opened up to me.

It's been *years*.

I didn't wait a week or two, a month or a few, but entire years. I used every trick under the sun to have her open up to me, but she only withdrew further into herself.

We used to be best friends, but she decided that she'd grown up and didn't need my shoulder to cry on.

She decided to go solo, battle with her pain alone, and cut me off. It's not because she didn't trust me, but more because she didn't want to bother me.

My little baby has always been an angel who refused to cause anyone discomfort. Even if that hurt her in retrospect.

Until now.

"I'm the one who's supposed to thank you, Glyn. Thank you for trusting me with all of that. I wish you were here so I could hug you."

"Next time, okay?"

"Okay. And bring Killian home so we can meet him."

I have a feeling he's the reason behind her change. She's finally removing the self-implanted shackles one by one after meeting him, and I want to thank him for it.

For bringing my youngest back.

"Prepare Dad mentally first."

"Don't worry about your dad, I'll take care of him. He'll be strict at the beginning, but I'll make him come around."

"Because he loves you?"

"I guess."

"How did Dad fall in love with you, Mum?"

"I don't know and I don't think he has the answer to that either. Love can't be forced or explained, it just happens, Glyn."

She appears thoughtful, then nods and ends the call after she updates me on school life and assures me that they're going back by the end of the weekend.

My chest deflates with a breath and I can finally smile after that nightmare.

Because screw that voice, I'll never choose between my children.

Besides, I have a husband who's built like a Viking. The two of us can save the three of them—no questions asked.

With a smile, I go back to our bed and slip into Levi's arms.

Our kids are all grown up and are taking different paths in life, but this man will always be my forever.

GLYNDON

My heart feels lighter after the heart-to-heart with Mum.

It's been long overdue and I finally got the chance to express everything that lurked inside me. I'm just lucky to have a patient, understanding mother like her.

When I woke up half an hour ago with a sore pussy and arse and found a text message from her, I couldn't resist calling.

I did put on my shorts and shirt first, though. Talking about Killian is one thing, but letting Mum see the savage marks he left on my body is entirely different.

Thank God, I kept my clothes after I bought the dress—that the brute tore.

After the call, my throat has turned dry, so I tiptoe out of the room and sneak down the stairs.

My steps come to a stop at the threshold of the kitchen and I grip my phone tighter when I realize someone is there.

Shit.

"Oh, Glyn. Come in." Reina tells me with a smile.

She's wearing a gorgeous blue satin robe that matches the color of her eyes. "Did you need something?"

I clear my throat to fight the scratchiness. "Just some honey and lemon if you have them."

"How about I make you herbal tea with honey? It'll soothe your throat in no time."

"That would be great, thanks."

She fixes me a cup of tea that's similar to hers and places some honey in it.

We sit across from each other and I take the first sip, then wince.

"It's hot, be careful." She slides a glass of water in my direction and I take it.

"Thanks. Do you always wake up in the middle of the night to drink herbal tea?"

"Only when I'm too excited to sleep." She beams. "It's so rare to have both Gaz and Kill visiting at the same time."

Her expression becomes distant and a sad smile lifts her lips. "No one told me they'd grow up this fast and leave me. I wish they would go back to being my little boys."

I sip from the cup and thankfully, it's not that hot. "Mum says that, too, about us."

"All moms do."

We remain silent for a bit as I contemplate the best way to broach the subject that's been bugging me since I first heard about it.

Apparently, today is courage day, because I murmur, "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"It's about the incident that happened when Killian was seven."

Her grip tightens around the cup. "He told you about that?"

"Yes, and he also said that you've been afraid of him since. Is that true?"

She pauses, then takes a long sip of her tea. "He thinks that?"

"Yeah."

"That's not true. I would never be scared of my own son. I'm just...scared of what he could do." Her gaze gets lost in the distance as her finger traces the rim of her cup. "At that moment, I realized that he's different, that he has no limits and no one can force them on him. Let's just say, I have bad memories about people like that. But that doesn't mean I'm afraid of him."

Hope blossoms in my chest. If it's all a misunderstanding, then maybe Killian can move on from that part of his childhood.

Yes, it won't heal him, since he's not actually sick, but it'll at least offer him closure. These are his parents, after all, and no matter how much he wants to pretend it doesn't affect him, I know it does, at least a little.

"I didn't know Kill thought that. I'll talk to him."

"Please don't say I told you about it."

"Don't worry. We girls have to stick up for each other, remember?" She smiles and places her hand on mine. "Thank you, Glyn."

"For what?"

"For bringing my baby boy home and putting the light back in his eyes. He lost it years ago and I thought I would never see it again."

I'm about to say she's imagining things and that I couldn't be the reason when a male voice calls from down the hall, "Prom queen? Where are you? You know I can't sleep without you by my side."

"Shhh, keep our talk a secret." She puts a finger to her mouth. "That's my cue to go."

Reina slips out of the kitchen and I sneakily follow after her to see how Mr. Carson wraps her in his arms, kisses the top of her head, and stares at her the way Dad stares at Mum.

Like he honestly can't live without her.

God, will I ever have someone look at me that way?

After they disappear up the stairs, I go back to the kitchen to finish my tea and check my messages.

There's one from an unknown number at the top. I'm about to delete it, not feeling like getting caught in their mind games anymore, but the <<<video>>> under their name catches my attention.

I open the text and click on the video.

My heart beats so fast when I see Devlin sitting in a small room, across a table from the red mask.

Devlin's shaking, looking devastated to the core. The changed voice that comes from the red mask makes the skin on the back of my neck stand on end.

"What a weakling. How about you drop dead?"

My fingers shake as I look on to see all hope vanish from Devlin's eyes.

The video ends.

My mouth fills with salt and that's when I realize a tear slipped in my mouth.

"What are you looking at?"

The cup in my hand falls and shatters to pieces, letting the liquid smear on the table and drip on the floor.

I slowly stare behind me to find Killian standing at my back, one of his arms taut as he clutches the edge of the chair.

His chest is bare, accentuated by the broken, haunting crows, and his face holds the darkness of a gothic chapel.

I always thought Killian was beautiful in a harsh way, but this is the first time I've see him as an actual nightmare.

My hand trembles as I lift it to show him the video. "Is this you?"

He watches it without a change of expression. My spine crowds with chills all over again when those words repeat.

The words of driving a suicidal person to their death.

The words no one should say to a normal person—let alone someone who's struggling with depression.

When he remains silent, I repeat, more determined this time, "Was the one in the red mask you, Killian?"

"So what if it was?"

I think I'm going to throw up.

Or faint.

Or both.

I stand on shaky legs and start to leave. I don't know where, but I need to go.

Now.

He grabs my shoulder, but I jerk back and slap it away. "Don't fucking touch me, you monster."

"Watch it," he grinds out.

"Don't come near me or I'll go to your parents' room and scream the whole damn house down. I mean it."

Then I'm running and running and crying and running.

I can feel the itch under my skin, the need to pull it all out, to end it all like Devlin did.

But I do something else.

I keep running.

KILLIAN

I drive my fist against the wall.

Pain explodes all over my knuckles, but it has no importance compared to the ticking in my head.

I'm nearing a cliff, an edge, and that's dangerous.

My actions turn unpredictable when reality contradicts my desires, and right now, they're the definition of a disaster.

I inhale deeply, but no amount of heavy breathing chases the black dots lining my vision.

Yet, I force myself to not bolt after Glyndon. Even I have no clue how I'll react if I catch her right now.

You know what? Fuck it.

I've told Glyndon time and again that escaping me isn't an option. She should've erased that thought from her repertoire, but she chose to leave.

She chose to defy me and provoke the devil side she hates so much.

I throw on some clothes, gather Glyn's stuff, and grab Mom's car keys. On my way to the garage, I check the app on my phone. The red dot moves at a moderate pace—she's not walking, but not on a vehicle either.

Looks like my little rabbit has picked up her favorite running habit.

And yes, as promised, I sure as fuck put a tracker on her phone after she ghosted me that time.

I catch up to her after a two-minute drive as she jogs on the side of the road. From behind, the nefarious night devours her

small silhouette.

If I were a predator searching for my next prey, she'd be a fucking perfect candidate.

My jaw clenches at the thought of another predator catching sight of her. He'd see how small and weak she is and make the snap decision to pounce.

I hit the brakes harder than needed on the side of the road and fling the door open.

She doesn't stop to inspect the commotion, doesn't even seem to be attuned to her surroundings.

One more fucking reason for her to be dragged into the darkness of the surrounding forest.

My parents' mansion is located in an upper-class, safe neighborhood on the outskirts of New York, but you never know what lurks in the dark.

I jog behind Glyndon, fall in step, then slide in front of her. She crashes straight into my chest and I grab her elbow to keep her from tumbling sideways.

The road's orange lights cast a warm glow on her drained, tear-streaked face. The usually bright green of her eyes has dimmed, becoming as lifeless as that first time I saw her on that cliff.

Upon seeing me, she flings herself backward and slaps my hand away.

My fingers twitch to strangle the fuck out of her, but I have a feeling it'll have the exact opposite effect of what I intend.

I grind my teeth. "That's the second and final time you push me away, are we clear?"

She starts to bypass me, but I block her path, my voice lowering. "Are we fucking clear?"

"Fuck you. You have been playing with my emotions all this time, knowing full well what type of relationship Devlin and I had."

"*Relationship?*" It takes effort not to shake the fuck out of her. "That's an overstatement. You knew him for maybe two months max before his death. The only reason you felt close to him is because he fed into your insecurities, made you feel like you're some kindred soul and blah fucking blah. He was manipulating

your stupid empathy and had a field day with it. I still can't figure out why, but I know manipulation when I see it."

"Oh, because you're the best at it?" Fresh tears cascade down her cheeks, and I wish I could take them away, but if I touch her, she'll hit my hand or push me, and I'll turn into an unhinged animal.

So I tap my finger against my thigh, summoning patience I don't have. "So what if I'm the best at it? That should be a compliment."

"Do you hear yourself?" Her voice raises. "You're not even offering excuses for what you said. Instead, you're pulling a classic you move by projecting the blame onto someone else. That someone is now dead and reached that point thanks to you."

"I didn't kill him."

"You might as well have had!" Her whole body shakes with the force of her words. "Do you not see how much your words could be cutting to someone in a depressive, suicidal state?"

"He was neither depressive nor suicidal. That slimy fuck might have fooled you, but he'd never be able to fool me."

Her lips tremble. "You'll never change, will you? Instead of admitting it, you're deflecting the blame."

"Instead of being rational, you're being fucking emotional, Glyndon."

"Sorry for not being a robot like you!"

"Watch it," I grit out. "It might not look like it but I'm pissed the fuck off right now, and I'm holding myself back. *Barely*. So quit pushing me. I mean it."

Her shoulders hunch as her chin quivers and her hands ball into fists. "I want to go home. To London."

"How were you planning to do that? By running all the way? You didn't even take your fucking passport or bag."

She purses her lips. "I can call Grandpa."

"Before or after someone attacks you in the middle of the night? You don't even know the States or New York. What, and I can't stress this enough, *the fuck* is going on in your head?"

"I want to get away from you." The deadpan in her voice scratches on my sanity. "Just leave me alone."

"No can do. Get in the car."

"No."

"You can either go nicely or not so nicely."

"I don't want to see your face right now, Killian," she murmurs and hits her chest. "It hurts. Right here. And if you keep forcing me, I'll throw myself from the car."

The tapping of my fingers turns up in intensity, but I stop myself from throwing her over my shoulder.

I told her I'd never let her have those suicidal thoughts again, but in this instant, I'm triggering them.

And while this could be the anger talking, I don't want to see her act on those emotions.

Not now. Not ever.

"Get in the car," I repeat with enough tension to detonate a country.

"I said—"

"I know what you fucking said. I'll drive you to the private jet and instruct the pilot to take you back to London."

"You...really will let me go back alone?"

"I don't want to, but I will."

Because for the first time, I hate the way she's looking at me. It's not fear nor is it annoyance or defiance.

It's disgust mixed with anger.

And I'm not ready to find out if she'll act on her threat.

I'll just give her some time to cool down before following after.

She eyes me suspiciously, but she climbs into the car.

During the whole ride, she crosses her arms and stares through the window, refusing to say a word.

I don't provoke her either, letting her have all the space she needs.

Once she's done with her tantrum, she'll pay back in full.

We wait an hour until the jet and the crew are ready. During the whole time, she puts earbuds in her ears and ignores my existence.

I come close to murder so many times in the span of one hour, which is more than at any other time in my life.

Glyndon doesn't look at me as she ascends the plane, seeming to have forgotten about her fear of flights.

After I make sure the crew would protect her with their lives, I begrudgingly descend and watch as the plane takes her away.

I slam my fist against the side of the car.

That does nothing to expel the rage seeping through my veins.

Time to purge it using the fucker who sent her that video.

ASHER

Something's not right.

I'm not sure what or why, but I'm certain of the red flags when my wife wraps her arm around me, her breathing erratic and her body tense.

Her fingers absentmindedly stroke my chest, but she's not falling asleep. Or talking.

She's just caught in a trance of her own making. A phase where I couldn't find her even if I tried.

This brings back horrible memories from when she used to give me the cold shoulder, distance herself from me and leave me battling violent tendencies where all I wanted was to punch anything that moved in her vicinity.

But we're over that phase. We've been over it for more than twenty-six years.

After we officially got together, there were times when Reina was upset with me about small details and chose to use her irritating habit of creating distance between us.

We talked about that in the first few months, and I taught her to never do that again. I told her how much it infuriated me when she didn't consider me part of her life when she's the center of mine.

Ever since then, she's gotten better at communicating her feelings, her reservations about certain things, and everything in between.

We've gotten to a point in our marriage where we don't have to speak to understand one another.

Tonight is different.

My wife hasn't been the same ever since she slipped out of bed earlier. And while I want to shake the answers out of her, I force myself to wait.

And wait.

And fucking wait.

It's impossible to go to sleep if she doesn't tell me.

The silence in our bedroom soon turns suffocating, and I slide my fingers into her shiny blonde hair.

It doesn't matter how long I've been with this woman, I still can't get enough of touching her. I still think about all the years we lost and can't get back.

I'm still trapped at that moment when I thought I'd lose her forever.

A small sigh leaves her lips and her stroking pauses. "Ash?"

"Hmm?"

"I think we made a mistake."

"About?"

She continues burying her face in my chest. "Remember when Kill brought us those desiccated mice and told us *Look, I can see inside them?*"

My jaw clenches. "It was when we first figured out he's like *her*. Of course I remember."

"He was only seven, Ash."

"And he already showed the signs."

"That's not the point. Our son was so young, and we must've looked at him as if he were a monster." She stares up at me with an unnatural shine in her deep blue eyes. "He told Glyndon that I've been scared of him since. Our baby boy thinks I've been afraid of him all this time, Ash. What are we going to do?"

"Hey." I sit up and bring her with me and she sniffles, her tears soaking her cheeks and my thumb as I try to wipe them away. "It's okay."

"It's not." Her voice breaks. "It's not okay for a seven-year-old to think his parents are scared of him. And it's absolutely not okay that he's carried that thought for over twelve years. That's how trauma is caused."

"He's not susceptible to trauma. You're feeling these terrible emotions, but he's not able to process them, Reina. You shouldn't project what you feel on him. He's not the same."

"But he's our son and we might have let him down."

"You're overthinking this. Besides, he doesn't care."

"Of course he does. I know you want him not to, and you've been trying to prove that he's only a monster with no redeeming qualities, but that's not true, Ash. If he doesn't care, would he make sure to answer my texts, call me regularly, and talk to me about his campus life? If he doesn't care, would he bring his girlfriend to meet us?"

"It's all a façade and a learned behavior. He's one hundred percent socialized and has long since perfected fooling the world around him. You can refuse to see it all you want, but that doesn't deny what he is."

"What the hell is *what he is* supposed to mean? He's our *son*. Our flesh and blood. He's not a guinea pig or a freak, stop analyzing him as if he is one."

"Not when he's prone to lose control any second."

She pushes away from me, her delicate brows creasing with a frown, then starts to leave the bed.

I clutch her wrist. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Anywhere but beside you until you stop talking about our son like he's a psychological case study."

"Like fuck you're leaving." I tug her down and she gasps as she falls back in my embrace. "You can be mad at me while you talk to me."

My wife puffs out a breath. "Please try to see him as more than your prejudice about his type. I was hurt, too, extremely, to the point of madness by *her*, but that doesn't mean Kill is like her or that I'd take out my pain on him."

I'm about to placate her, just to get her out of this mood, when a loud bang echoes from the room beside our master suite.

Reina jumps up, throwing her robe on, and I follow after wearing a T-shirt.

We both rush out and stop in the hallway when the *bang* comes again.

My wife and I share a look. Gareth.

We hurry to his room and surprisingly, the door is open.

The scene that plays in front of us is straight out of a horror movie. Reina places two hands on her mouth as what I predicted would eventually happen takes form in front of our eyes.

Killian holds his brother by an elbow to his throat, pinning him against the wall. The *bang* sound is from when he pulls him just to slam him back again.

The savage look on Killian's face resembles my most frightening nightmares and is nothing like I've seen before. Not even when he was seldom caught making trouble at school. All light from his eyes—that Reina wouldn't shut up about—that he graced us with during this visit is gone.

In its place, complete gloom covers his features.

"I'm not going to ask again. Why did you send her that video?" Despite the darkness in his features, Killian sounds collected, in his element, absolutely not on the verge.

Which is a red flag since he's the type who gets calmer the more he's enraged.

The deadly type of calm.

"I told you not to get involved, didn't I? I told you to stay the fuck out of my business if you didn't want me to slice your fucking throat, but you went ahead and put your stupid fucking nose where it doesn't belong."

Gareth raises a fist and punches him in the face. Reina gasps from the force of the blow, and blood explodes on Killian's lips, but he doesn't release his brother. If anything, his hold appears to get stronger.

Reina runs to them, places a hand on Killian's arm, and tries to sound firm but gentle. "Let him go, Kill."

"Stay out of it, Mom. My dear brother and I have a score to settle."

"You're hurting him."

"He hurt me first and this is payback."

"Killian, please." Her fingers dig into his arm, but it's like she doesn't exist.

"Don't beg for him, Mom. Just don't."

"Let your brother go, Killian." I step forward, approaching them at a steady pace.

When he doesn't show any sign of hearing me, I grab him by the nape and wrench him back with enough force to send him flying against the wall if I release him.

But I don't.

Because as much as I was a violent person in my youth, I don't use that shit anymore—especially not on my family.

Gareth bends over, slaps both palms on his knees, and coughs. The color slowly returns to his face as his breathing settles down. Reina pours him a glass of water, from his minibar, that he gulps in one go.

Killian glares at him, his index finger tapping manically on his thigh.

"Such a golden boy, Gaz," he mocks, his tone on the verge of exploding. "Look at you being saved by Mommy and Daddy again."

I tighten my hold on his neck. "Knock it off."

"I know you don't believe me." Gareth holds his head high. "But I didn't do it."

"You're right, I don't believe you. Because, the last time you got in between us, you wanted to ruin me through her. This was your chance to do that."

"That was before I realized she's the best thing that's ever happened to you, asshole. I didn't need to bring you down, because you've left me alone ever since she came into the picture. You don't actively try to make my life hell like before, and you were starting to seem like a decent human being. But maybe I was just fooling myself."

"Fuck you and your victim speech. It's getting old fast."

"Killian Patrick Carson." Reina taps her foot on the ground. "I understand you're upset, but you will not be speaking to your brother in that tone."

"Upset?" he echoes. "Try fucking enraged, Mom. Your dear oldest son showed Glyndon something she shouldn't have seen and now, she left."

"I told you I didn't show her that. I even deleted it from the archives." Gareth's voice rises with frustration. "Ask Jeremy, he was there and told me to bury the hatchet. Besides, you didn't

expect her to stay in the dark all her life, did you? She would've eventually found out. If not from me, then from someone else."

Killian jerks in my hold in an attempt to go at his brother's throat again.

"Calm down," I say with patience I don't particularly feel right now.

"Spare me the bullshit." He forcibly wrenches himself from my hold. "You never wanted me to be born? Wonderful. Guess what, Dad? I never wanted to be your son. There, I said it, and you know what? I'm not even sorry, Mom. I should've told him this a long time ago."

Reina physically steps backward from the shock, her lips trembling as if she's finally seeing what type of monster her son actually is.

The type who'd assault his brother, jab at his father, and emotionally wreck his mother without blinking.

But I can't even gather the energy to say I told you so, because Killian's words and the anger behind them catches me completely off guard.

My first thought with Killian is to always subdue him somehow, shackle him in a way, knock him down a few notches so he never grows fully into who he is.

When I first found out about his tendencies, I took him hunting and enrolled him in highly competitive sports. I taught him how to channel that destructive energy and tame it, but he often spiraled out of control.

He eventually grew bored of repressing his true nature and rebelled. He punched his classmates, picked fights with thugs, and sent a few people to the ER.

I refused to bury his actions or let him use any sort of privileges. The first time the principal called me, I told him to suspend him. The second time, my father covered his tracks.

And that continued for all the times that followed.

My father is the reason Killian never learned his lesson. He kept getting him out of trouble so that the Carson name wasn't sullied, even when I told him that he was only making him more untouchable.

"What's wrong with being untouchable?" my father asked without batting an eye. "At least he'll be powerful."

My old man only ever cared about that—power. Didn't matter how it was attained as long as the family name remained in a prestigious position.

Needless to say, I didn't agree with him, and the fact that Killian stopped calling me and started going to his grandfather started a rift between us.

However, it's the first time I've heard the words, or more accurately, the bomb he dropped just now.

I face him fully. "What did you just say?"

His shoulders have tensed, and the expression on his face is the most savage I've seen. He's losing control.

I feel it.

He must feel it, too.

But he still speaks in that eternally casual tone. "I heard you that night when I was nine and had beat up that tool who was calling Mia names. Mom was depressed, drinking wine late at night in the kitchen, and you came to find her. I was right outside when you told her you should've only had Gareth and that I'm defective. And you know what? I heard Mom being angry, I heard her telling you to never say that again if you loved her, but your words are the only thing I remember. Thanks for the beautiful childhood memories, Dad. You hate who I am with everything in you, but you should be thankful. If those words had been directed at your golden boy there, he would've developed a trauma. Shouldn't we all be grateful that I'm not a neurotypical fucking weakling?"

"Oh, Kill." Reina steps toward him, but he holds up a hand.

"Spare me, Mom. I don't want to hear you defending him."

"I'm sorry, baby." She grabs a hold of his arm. "I'm sorry you had to hear that and think I was afraid of you because of the mice incident. A mother can't be scared of her own child. The only reason I was horrified back then was because I realized you were like someone from our past. Someone Asher and I loved with all our hearts but ended up stabbing us in the back. It's why he said those words, too. We knew there was a chance of having a child who inherited that someone's genes, and it happened with you."

Asher said we should only have Gareth, but I'm the one who wanted another child, I'm the one who wanted you with all my heart, Kill. I know what he said was wrong, but he didn't even mean it. Those were words of anger. Asher loves you as much as he loves Gareth, Kill. But you're the one who distanced yourself from him."

And now, I know why.

It wasn't because my father covered his tracks instead of me or because I thought maybe he disliked me.

Turns out he genuinely dislikes me.

A shot of pain explodes behind my rib cage and spreads all over my chest. I couldn't speak even if I wanted to, so I take some time to regulate my breathing.

Gareth's gaze flits between me and his brother as if he's unable to believe what he's hearing.

"So it's my fault now?" Killian barks out cruel laughter, then it dies out as abruptly as it started. "Wow, Mom, I feel gaslighted right now and that definitely doesn't look good on you."

"Do you not remember how you stopped spending time with your father? You even stopped hugging him in greeting and often left the table first." She softens her voice.

"That's because he prefers his golden boy."

"Not true," Gareth says. "Whenever we invited you to come along, you refused."

"Forgive me if I don't like spending time with a father who never wanted me."

"Killian," I call, and he slowly faces me, jaw set.

He thinks we're going to war again, that this will be another fight and I'll assert my parental position by suppressing him again.

I place a hand on his shoulder and he tenses, ready for the jab or whatever he thinks I'll do.

"I'm sorry."

His eyes widen a little, which is about the only reaction he shows, but before he can think about it further, I continue.

"I didn't realize my words, as impulsive as they were, would have this effect on you and I apologize for not looking further into the reason you methodically cut off your relationship with me. But

if it's any consolation, it's not about your person, son. Your behavior reminded me of painful memories and the young bitter me, and I reacted badly to that. It's not your fault, it's completely mine. I'm sorry I couldn't be a better father figure to you."

Reina cries silently and Gareth holds her shoulder, hugging her to his side.

Killian narrows his eyes, but the stiffness has vanished. "You apologized twice."

"So?"

"You've never apologized before. Not to anyone."

"I did to your mother once, and I'm doing it again to my son. My family members are the only ones I'll apologize to when an apology is due. And, Kill?"

"Yeah?"

"You and Gareth aren't different in my eyes, not even a little. I'm only harsher with you because your character is harsher."

He shrugs. "Gareth can be a pain in the ass, too. You just don't see it."

"Hey!" my eldest son protests.

Reina smiles with tears in her eyes and rubs his chest. "I want a family hug."

And then she pulls us all in a hug, because she can be sentimental like that. All three of us would rather not do this, but if there's anything we agree on, it's our care for this woman.

She can make me and our boys burn a whole town for her by just saying the words.

Then she hugs Kill individually, basically strangling him, considering his expression, then whispers something in his ear.

For the first time ever, his features soften and he looks like that six-year-old boy who used to sit on a swing and stare into space like an old man.

"What are you looking at, Kill?" I asked him once.

He sighed with the exasperation of a person who's seen it all.

"How boring everything is. How do I make it less boring, Dad?"

I should've known by then that we had a special kid on our hands. Someone who didn't need the world, or even us.

There's no doubt in my mind that if he was on his own, he'd live just fine, maybe even be freer than he is right now. He

wouldn't have to worry about hiding his true self or repressing his urges for my and his mother's sake.

He'd be a true monster and would probably get away with it for a while before he eventually got locked up.

But we need him in our lives, cold-bloodedness and manipulativeness included.

Yes, he can be a monster, but he usually chooses not to at home. It's a mature choice he made a long time ago after the fights stopped, and one he'll continue to make.

But even if he doesn't, we'll deal with it when it comes.

One thing's for certain, Killian will always be my son.

I'll never forget the tears in Reina's eyes when she held him in her arms for the first time. "Look at him, our baby is so beautiful, Ash."

"He is."

"He would've been more beautiful if he was a girl, but oh well, we can always try again." She kissed his forehead. "I love you to bits, baby."

"Can he play football with me, Daddy?" Gareth asked me while he craned his neck to see his brother.

"Sure thing. We can teach him."

"Yes!" He kissed his brother on the cheek. "I'm gonna teach you all the things."

That moment seems like it happened yesterday. I think the reason it's coming back to me now is because this scene is creepily similar to it.

It's been such a long time since the four of us have felt like a connected family. Killian always, without doubt, ruined it.

He was acting out, I now realize, demanding the attention he thought he was due.

At this moment, he doesn't seem like he feels the need to.

"Now"—Reina pulls back—"did you say Glyn left?"

Seeming to have recalled the reason he's been behaving like a beast in the middle of the night, Killian clenches his jaw and nods.

"It wasn't me," Gareth says, softer this time. "If I'd wanted to do that, I would've done it back at campus, not here."

My wife strokes Killian's arm. "Was she mad at you?"

"Very."

"If you apologize, she might listen."

"I don't think an apology would cut it. She..." He trails off, then lowers his head. "She looked both scared and disgusted with me. She's never looked at me that way before and I don't know how to fix it."

"First things first, don't be yourself. It'd do more harm than good," Gareth tells him and Killian flips him off.

"On the contrary," I say. "Be yourself. If she can't deal with you at your worst, then you'll eventually suffocate her and she'll hate you. And you'll probably hate her, too, and it'll turn into a vicious cycle."

"If you truly care about her, then pursue her, Kill," Reina supplies.

"You think?"

"I'm sure. How do you think your father got me? He just refused to leave me alone and I had to settle." She sighs, eyes filled with glimmering emotions. "It helped that I'd loved him since I was a teen, though."

I've been married to this woman for over twenty-five years, and she still makes me fall for her harder every day.

Every single moment.

She's not the reason behind my happiness—she's the definition of the word.

Killian marches to Gareth and wraps an arm around his shoulder. "We're going back to campus."

"Why would I come along?"

"You need to show me all the archives of that night. I have a theory."

"Can't it wait till the morning?"

"Why would it?"

"Why would it not?"

After some arguments, they finally agree to head back. They even wake my father up in the middle of the night so they can borrow his private jet.

After they change, Reina and I walk them to the entrance. She hugs them together, then one at a time while smoothing invisible wrinkles from their clothes.

"But I still didn't get my fill of you, boys."

"We'll come back, Mom." Gareth grabs Killian in a chokehold. "I'll make sure to bring this idiot, too."

"Who are you calling an idiot, wanna die?" Kill tries to get out of his hold and fails.

Gareth only releases him when he hugs me goodbye. "See you, Dad."

"See you, son."

Killian is about to turn and leave, but I grab his shoulders and for the first time since he was a kid, I wrap my arms around him and bring him close.

It takes him a moment before he stiffly pats my back. It'll take him some time, but he'll get there.

"Stay out of trouble, son."

He grins as we break apart. "How else will you ask about me?" I narrow my eyes and he laughs. "That was a joke."

Then they get in the backseat of the car so my chauffeur can drive them to the airport.

Reina and I remain at the door long after they're gone, arms wrapped around each other as she sniffles.

"Why do they grow up so fast?" she grumbles but then sighs and smiles up at me. "Silver lining, I'm so glad we had that conversation tonight as painful as it was."

"Me, too."

She strokes my cheek, her touch soft, loving, and the only thing I need. "I know it must've triggered that horrible trauma, but I'm so glad you could look past it and talk to Kill. I'm so proud of you."

I can die a happy man if my wife is proud of me. No questions asked.

"I love you, Ash."

"I love you, too, prom queen." I tug her closer. "Do you think he'll be able to get Glyndon back?"

"Oh, I'm sure he will. He looks at her the way you look at me."

I raise an eyebrow. "And how do I look at you?"

"Like you'll destroy the world as long as I remain safe."

"It's true. Now, tell me, what did you whisper to Kill earlier?"

She smiles as she stares in the distance. "That we love him no matter how different he is."

GLYNDON

I 'm the worst sneak alive.

But when I arrive at our family's mansion at night, I manage to slip inside without waking anyone.

It helps that I know the security code.

What doesn't help, however, is the lights that keep going on automatically whenever I move.

Jeez.

However, I manage to steal a tub of ice cream and hide behind the table in the ballroom.

This small nook is as safe as it can get. It reminds me of when I was running around in Grandpa's house as a kid, how he carried me on his shoulders, told me stories, and taught me chess.

The light stays on, but it'll be off in about a minute.

Opening the ice cream, cherries and chocolate, my favorite—because I'm the only one who eats it around here—I stuff my mouth with two spoonfuls that hurt my teeth.

But I do it again.

And again.

Tears start to gather in my eyes, but I refuse to let them out. I cried on and off on the flight back home until my head hurt and the flight attendant looked at me as if I were a freak. I stayed in the airport for a few hours to gather my bearings.

I've never flown on my own, but I didn't even think about aviation disasters when I was tending to my broken heart.

And that might have made me cry harder, recalling just how Killian made me comfortable, held me, didn't even try to satisfy

his libido as always. He was just there for me platonically.

Then he crushed me to pieces.

Though, from what I saw in the video, the crashing happened before I even met him.

He was always meant to break my heart, leave me hollow, and confiscate my everything.

"Glyndon, is that you?"

At Grandpa's voice, I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand and step out from behind the table, tub of ice cream in hand and an awkward smile on my face.

Grandpa stands near the entrance, wearing silk gray pajamas and an open robe. Grandma peeks from behind him, her black hair falling to her shoulders, her face free of makeup save for red lips. And she's wearing a matching pajama set.

"See, I told you it was probably Glyn, Jonathan."

"Hi. I didn't mean to intrude this late."

"Nonsense." Grandpa gathers me in a hug. "You never intrude, princess."

My fingers clench into his back and it takes everything in me not to break down in tears.

"Missed you, Grandpa."

"Is that why you haven't returned my calls in the past...two days?"

"Your clinginess is showing, Jonathan." Grandma wrenches me from Grandpa's embrace for her own hug. "How are you, hon?"

"Okay, I guess."

She stares at the ice cream and then back at me. "Forget about this and let me get you something more soothing."

Then she disappears with my junk food, leaving me alone with Grandpa.

"Now, tell me who made my princess cry so that I can castrate him."

I wipe at my tears. "I wasn't crying. Something just got in my eyes."

"Uh-huh, the last time something got in your eyes, that boyfriend of yours died and we nearly lost you, in retrospect."

"Devlin was not my boyfriend."

"You went through all of that for a non-boyfriend?"

"He was a friend, Grandpa."

"Friendship goes both ways. If he was only using your support and good heart, he wasn't your friend, he was a parasite."

"And how would you know? You only have Uncle Ethan as a friend."

"His husband, Agnus, too."

"He hates you."

Grandpa grins. "So what? I love riling him up, so that makes him my friend. Don't tell this to anyone, but it's the highlight of my week to make that man jealous."

I smile, loving how carefree he becomes when talking about his friends, business partners, and in-laws.

Though *friends* is a strong word.

They mostly bicker.

"You can be so evil, Grandpa."

"Can be? I invented evil, princess." He pats my cheek. "Now, talk to me."

I rub my hand on my shorts, then pause, recalling that I'm trying to get rid of the nasty habit. "I'm just...lost, I guess. Have you ever trusted someone and they murdered that trust?"

"Not really, but I might have to check the morgue for any traitors I may have forgotten existed."

I snort. "Well, I did. And I know I should be angry, and I am, but I'm more heartbroken. I'm more...*mad* about being blindsided. See, I knew he wasn't normal from the beginning, and Lan even gave me a way out, but I didn't take it. I was headstrong and high on dopamine and the power of having my own choice, but it eventually hurt me, Grandpa. I eventually found out that Lan was right and he's *always* right." My voice chokes. "And now, I'm so broken that I don't know which pieces to pick up. That is, if there are any pieces left."

"Come here." He gathers me in his arms, and this time, I let the tears cascade down my cheeks.

"It hurts, Grandpa."

"Being stabbed in the back does that." He strokes my hair. "But remember, Glyndon, they're not the only ones who can do the stabbing."

I pull back, sniffing. "W-what do you mean?"

"You're a King. We don't stay down to take the jab. We hit right back."

"I can't. He's...much stronger."

"No one is stronger than a King." He fishes out his phone and enters a number, then puts it on speaker.

My eyes widen when I see *Levi* on the screen.

"Why are you calling my dad?" I whisper-yell.

Grandpa puts a finger to his lips as my father picks up, sounding groggy. "Uncle? Why are you calling this late? Are you dead?"

"Obviously not," Grandpa says in his signature hard voice. I learned early on that it only ever softens around Grandma and me.

"Then call me back in the morning. And next time you're having late evening episodes, call that fucker Aiden."

"There's an emergency about your daughter."

My eyes widen and Dad pauses before he sobers up. "What happened? She was texting me just fine yesterday."

"Someone broke her heart and we need to break his legs."

"Grandpa!" I try to hang up, but he keeps the phone out of reach.

"I see." Dad sounds contemplative.

"Be here in twenty minutes."

"On my way. Let me scold the hell out of my boys first for failing to protect their sister."

"Dad, don't!"

"We'll talk in a few, Glyn." *Beep. Beep. Beep.*

I groan. "Grandpa, why did you do that?"

"You said you can't hit this tool yourself, so we'll happily do you the favor."

It dawns on me then. Grandpa was trying to teach me a lesson, to tell me that I had to do this for it to work.

"If you hit him for me, I'll always feel helpless."

He raises a brow. "Maybe."

"But if I do it myself, I'll get closure."

"Who knows?"

I reach out and kiss him. "Thanks, Grandpa! Can you have Moses drive me back to campus?"

"I'll do you one better and send you on my private jet. That is, if you can handle flying?"

"No, no flying three times in two days. And can you please call Dad and tell him the plan is off?"

"Who said it's off?" He smirks. "We can always hit him after you're done with him. No one messes with a King and lives to talk about it."

BY THE TIME I GET TO CAMPUS, I'M BOILING WITH THE DESTRUCTIVE energy Grandpa has fueled me with.

Because he's right.

Why should I be heartbroken, crying, and feeling miserable when the bastard doesn't feel any of those emotions and never will?

The least I can do is hit him where it hurts to prove he has no hold on me.

And where it hurts is his mountain-sized ego. At first, I think of rubbing another man in his face, because I know how much he hates the mere thought of any man breathing near me.

But then I recall that he could and would kill them and I'm not ready to have that on my conscience. So the best way is to make him believe that without putting a specific person at risk.

After Moses, Grandpa's trusted driver and bodyguard, drives me, I ask him if I can have a picture of me holding his hand on the armrest of the car and he says, "Whatever you need to get back at the loser."

So I take the picture and upload it on Instagram with the caption:

I finally found my type. Older men, yum.

Before I can start backpedaling and thinking of the consequences, I hit Post.

Then I walk to my car in front of the dorm, slide inside, and drum my fingers against the steering wheel.

One minute passes.

My phone lights up with the thousandth call from Killian that I ignore like the rest.

So he switches to texts.

Who is that and does he know he'll die as soon as I find you?

I know you're provoking me on purpose and it's fucking working. My promise to have you bounce on my cock in his blood is also still in working motion.

Delete that and talk to me before I start showing my devil side, Glyndon.

I told you that if you leave me on Read again, things will take a turn for the worse.

You picked war, baby, and I'm here to serve.

I throw my phone in my shorts pocket and drive to the place that started and ended it all.

As soon as I arrive at the cliff on the far end of the forest, I stand on the edge and stare below.

At the violent waves crashing against the harsh rocks, at how much the water has turned them sharp, steep—a natural wonder that's able to steal lives.

And be the site of a fucked-up encounter.

Grandpa was right—as usual. The more I think about my friendship with Devlin, the more it doesn't feel like a friendship.

He definitely didn't feel happy for me like Cecily, Ava, Remi, and even Annika do when I tell them about something that's made me happy.

Not to mention that he always loved to talk about himself, how he was an orphan, how he battled with depression his entire life, and how no one understood him.

I always listened to him because I thought we were kindred spirits and shared the same issues.

Our identities are misunderstood. Our depression is overlooked.

But now, I don't know anymore.

I think his death hit me harder because I was right here when it happened. Right beside him in the car.

The wind flips my hair back as memories from that night hit me.

"Come with me, Glyn," he said. "We can end the pain once and for all."

"I...don't know, Dev. I don't really want that. I...can't do that to my family."

"Aren't you the lucky one to have people who love you?"

"Dev, don't say that. You have me."

"And since when do you think you're enough? You're nothing more than a fucking coward, Glyn. You sing this tune of being misunderstood and say that your art is compared to your mother's and brothers', but ever thought it's because you're mediocre as fuck and shouldn't even be painting in the first place? What type of artist is scared shitless of ending their life? How about you start practicing what you preach?"

Tears streamed down my cheeks and I couldn't believe that I was staring at the same Devlin I'd known for months.

His face was dark, too, nothing like the kind-hearted friend I'd known.

"D-Devlin, how could you say that?"

"Get out of my car, coward." When I remained in place, he shouted, "Get the fuck out!"

I opened the door, but I swayed on my feet, and I remember feeling dizzy, because I leaned against a tree for balance.

No clue how long I remained that way, my vision hazy and my limbs shaky, probably due to the drinks we'd had earlier.

Then, in slow, distorted motion, Devlin revved forward at full speed and tumbled over the cliff.

Back then, I was so shocked that I didn't move for a long time, thinking that maybe I was dreaming and if I remained still, I would wake up.

Then I was screaming his name and crawling to the edge of the cliff because my legs failed me.

The car was sinking in the water below and I was crying and calling the police and shouting for help.

It was a mess.

Two days later, they found his body and he was identified by his roommates.

Besides his death, his words had the worst impact on me. It made my depression worse and my existential crisis critical.

Until a certain bastard came into the picture.

No matter how hurtful Devlin was, Killian had no right to tell him those words that could've possibly propelled him to end it all.

While I want to ignore him some more, there must be a story behind his whole encounter with Devlin.

But I'm ready to ghost him and make him lose his mind like he does to me on a daily basis.

Payback is a bitch and so am I, Killian.

"Miss me?"

I flinch at the very familiar voice and a scream bubbles in my throat when I turn around and see who's standing behind me.

No, no, no...

This must be a play of my imagination. Or maybe I've become psychic and started seeing ghosts.

Or else...or else, how could Devlin be in front of me?

He looks different, too. Wearing all black leather like a member of a rock band, his hair is floppy, and his lower lip and nose are pierced.

If I didn't already know Devlin was an only child, I'd swear this was his evil twin or something.

"D-Devlin?"

"Do you see anyone else here?" Even his voice is different. It's harsher, like the Devlin from the car that last day.

"But you..." I stare at the cliff and then back at him. "I saw you fall. You fell off the cliff and they found your body..."

"You saw the car fall while you were drugged out of your mind because you're so trusting, it's annoying. As for the news about the body, nothing some connections couldn't take care of, and I lied, I'm not an orphan. My family is pretty much alive, loaded, and associated with the mafia."

My head crowds with the onslaught of information, unable to keep up.

"You visiting the site of my death is a very touching declaration of love, which would've mattered if you weren't a fucking whore," Devlin continues in his haughty tone. "You were supposed to let Killian play around with you a little, not take my sister's place."

"Your sister?"

"You already met her. Cherry."

My heart drums harder in my chest. "Why...why would you go to all the trouble of faking your death? Just for the club?"

"The club? No, it's for fucking power, Glyndon. I didn't need to be part of the Heathens, since I'm already a Serpent. And do you know what we want? Those fucking Heathens and Elites wiped off the planet. You served as my opening to Landon, which is about the only reason I'd get close to a dull person like you. But then I thought, why not make that fucker Killian part of the equation, too? He likes your type—naive, innocent, waiting for corruption. So I talked about you a little, threw him the bait, and peeked his curiosity. Surprise, surprise. He fell right into it."

Oh my God. The reason Killian came to this cliff was because of Devlin's death, wasn't it? It's why we met. Because of this...this person I don't know anymore.

I don't think I did in the first place.

"It's time you play your role properly, Glyn."

He lifts me up by the hair and I shriek as the roots nearly rip, but I don't focus on that when he drives his fist into my face.

My whole body jerks back as red-hot pain explodes in my nerve endings. My mouth fills with blood and I choke on it.

I attempt to escape from his hold, but he punches me in the ribs, knocking the breath out of my lungs.

"See, they're all playing nice with each other and I don't like that. What's so fun about powerful secret societies if they're not constantly at war? And I'm not talking about petty fights, night raids, rivals' week, and the whole boring charade. I'm talking about actual blood, Glyndon, you feel me?"

I gather as much blood in my mouth as I can, then I spit it in his face. "I'm sorry I wasted a tear on you. I thought you struggled with mental illness, but you used my compassion to orchestrate your twisted anarchy. You'll never get away with this, you sick bastard."

He wipes the blood with his palm, then raises it and slaps me across the face with enough force to make me see white dots.

"Glyndon, Glyndon, dear fucking Glyndon. Boring, sweet, and absolutely forgettable Glyndon. You're missing the whole point here. It's not about whether or not I get away with it, it's about fucking war. See, when you go running back to Killian, he'll know

we did it, since we've been getting on their nerves for a while now. If you go to Landon, the Elites will be after blood. It'll be even more fun if you get Eli and Creighton involved. Do you hear that?" He cups his ear mockingly. "That's the sound of a win-win."

I smile, then laugh long and hard and so maniacally that even I start to believe I've gone crazy.

He shakes me with his hold on my hair. "What the fuck are you on, bitch?"

I spit in his face again. "You'll never get what you want, Devlin."

He punches me hard enough to throw me to the ground. My vision blackens and I think I hear him laughing and laughing and laughing.

He who laughs last laughs best, asshole.

If he thinks I'll go to either Killian or Landon and start a war, he's sorely mistaken. I'll wait until I heal and then I'll talk to Jeremy and Gareth so they'll take care of him.

They're reasonable enough to not get too violent or start a war.

I think I've got the plan all in motion until I feel strong arms lifting my head.

For a moment, I think I'm imagining things, that in a moment of weakness, he's the one who comes to mind first.

But when I strain to open my eyes, I find Killian's dark face staring at me, his fingers stroking my cheeks, and his voice a raging volcano.

"Who the fuck did this to you?"

Unable to keep my eyes open, I let them close, a pained moan leaving my lips. For some reason, it feels safe with him here.

I don't want it to, but it does.

And I can finally admit that.

"Fuck, baby. Open your eyes. Tell me who did this."

I purse my lips and let the darkness swallow me in its clutches.

KILLIAN

Of all the feelings that exist in my arsenal, irritation and anger take the crown as the prominent ones.

Especially fucking anger.

There needs to be an outlet to relieve the constant rage lurking inside me. A little bit of violence, a little bit of mayhem.

A little bit of anarchy.

I thought I knew anger so well, that I was already acquainted with the sensation of bubbling blood in my veins, the tensing of my limbs, and the red covering my vision.

Turns out, I never knew what actual anger was until I found Glyndon's half-unconscious body by the cliff.

After that stunt of posting her hand in another man's on IG, I was already planning murder—all eloquent thoughts Mom planted in my head to get Glyndon back long gone.

Or maybe they weren't. I was just using another method to pursue her.

And since she wasn't answering my calls, I had to use the tracker I implanted in her phone to find out where she went.

When I realized where she was driving, a disturbing uneasiness hooked against my bones and left me on the edge. I drove with the recklessness of a madman who had every intention of risking his life.

The scene I find, however, is nothing I could've conjured in my fucked-up mind.

At first, when I see the curled-up figure lying beneath a tree, I refuse to believe it's her.

The early morning light casts a bluish hue on her legs that are tucked into her chest.

My heart thunders as I kneel beside her, so gently, so calmly as if another entity has taken over my body.

I touch her shoulder and carefully tug. Her head rolls and bumps against my knee.

The person I see in front of me is almost unrecognizable. A map of violet bruises spread over her cheeks, and one of her eyes is blue, swollen, and slightly open. Blood mars her once translucent skin and leaves a dry trail beneath her nose and mouth.

It's like someone used her as a punching bag.

Someone who'll wish for death when I get my fucking hands on them.

This is the part where I realize I actually had no clue what anger is all about. Those bursts of anger I felt before? Those could be called strong irritations or waves of mild anger at best.

But they don't compare to this all-encompassing rage flowing in my veins instead of blood.

Splashes of red cover my vision until it's difficult to see Glyndon through them, but I still grab her face and cradle it on my lap. She's so small and weak in my arms. I always thought she was easily breakable, but that didn't matter once I decided she was under my protection.

I just never thought someone would have the fucking audacity to touch her.

My hands are steady as I inspect her body for other injuries. My professors always expressed awe at my ability to remain collected under stress. The way I have a muted response to threats and disasters—a fact that enables me to find a solution faster than my colleagues.

That muted response is faltering right now, but I grab on to it with all my might. That's the only way to assess Glyndon's condition.

The good news is, she's breathing.

The bad news is, she's doing it with effort.

"Who the fuck did this to you?" I don't recognize the masked rage in my deadly calm tone.

Or the need to break all hell loose.

As if realizing I'm here, Glyndon blinks, and a lone tear slides down her cheek as a pained moan slips from between her lips.

I reach out a finger and wipe that tear, but she's out again.

"Fuck, baby. Open your eyes. Tell me who did this."

No reply.

I hold her hands in mine and they're bloody, a few nails broken.

She fought, my Glyndon. She didn't let the scum brutalize her without hurting them in return.

Obviously, she lost, but still, I'm so fucking proud of her.

When I start to lift her up, something slips from between her stomach and leg. It was hidden by her curled-up position earlier.

A mask.

My fingers slide against the latex material and over the grotesque details of the horror skull mask with a toothy grin.

Fucking Serpents.

Logically, I know this is a provocation for war, which I promised Jeremy I wouldn't instigate.

But that was before they touched what's mine.

They're asking for war, but they'll get fucking annihilation.

AFTER ASSESSING GLYNDON'S CONDITION PERSONALLY, I DON'T FIND anything awry aside from the external injuries. I still take her to the hospital for a checkup and sure as fuck use all the tricks to have her seen first.

One of my professors confirms it's only external, after all, prescribes her pain medications and says he'll have to report it to the police. I let Jeremy deal with him and take her back to the mansion.

My body has been stiff, ready to snap in two, and I've been absolutely unapproachable ever since I found her.

No, make that ever since she received that video and bolted on me.

There's nothing I want to do more than stay by her side and wait for her to wake up, but I have some lives to fuck up first.

So I call Brandon to come and stay with her. The only reason I trust him is because he's her blood and obviously cares about her well-being.

Not her other brother, because fuck that guy.

But they show up together at my bedroom, and that fucker Gareth lets them in.

"What?" He feigns innocence when I glare at him. "They're her brothers. I couldn't let one in and kick the other one out."

"Glyn!" Brandon runs to her side, a look of shock written on his face as he crouches by her bed, then looks at me. "Is she..."

"She'll live. Can't say the same about the one who did that to her." I glare at Landon, who strides inside with the nonchalance of someone who owns the place, then his eyes narrow when he sees his sister's state. "And what the fuck are you doing here?"

"I'm here for my sister, and if you'd attempted to keep me out, I would've burned this whole fucking place down—after I got her out, of course. I also received a text." He fetches his phone and shows me a text from an unknown number.

We spit on your grave.

Attached is a picture of Glyndon, all battered, with a skull mask lying beside her.

These motherfuckers clearly want to die young.

"I want in on whatever you're planning," Landon informs me.

"And what makes you think I'll let you?"

He steps in front of me so that we're staring at each other. "I wasn't asking, Carson. I'll be in whether you like it or not. I could've done this on my own, gotten my club involved and wiped those scum off the face of the earth, but you have more information about the Serpents than I do, and this operation isn't about some trivial grudge, so it needs to be thorough. No one fucks with my sister, not even you, hear me?"

"Is that your way of asking for assistance?"

"As I said, I wasn't asking. I will be in, even if I have to hijack your operation."

"I don't react well to threats."

"And I don't react well to being kept out."

We glare at each other for what seems like an eternity before Brandon interrupts, "Can't this be dealt with in a different way?"

"You mean instead of decapitating them, we cut them into pieces?" I say.

He winces. "No, I meant calling the police like actual civilized people?"

"Fuck the cops."

"This is personal," Landon says.

"Not sure if I should be glad or creeped out that you two are finishing each other's sentences." Brandon's face is full of horror. "How about you negotiate with the Serpents to hand over whoever did this to Glyn so that you can both avoid war? It's obviously one man's work."

"Nah, I want all their heads," Landon says.

"I agree with the motherfucker." I point a thumb in his direction. "Keep an eye on her and let me know if anything happens. There's someone I need to take care of first."

I step out of the room and grab Gareth by the collar. "You follow me."

Landon falls in step beside us, hands in pockets and expression blank.

I side-eye him. "Do you need something?"

"It's hard to do, but pretend I'm not here."

I ignore him because I have more important things to take care of.

My steps are light, almost inaudible, as we walk all the way to the annexed house. The one new members can stay in. They're only allowed in the main house during a party or if we invite them over.

A petite figure dressed in black pants and a hoodie is sneaking toward the back entrance.

"Wasn't she supposed to be locked up?" I ask Gareth.

"She was, ever since we flew here, but she obviously used some trick to persuade the guards to let her go."

I quicken my pace, grab her by the hoodie, and pull her back with enough force to make her shriek. Her bleached blonde hair falls out in disarray as I stand behind her like the Grim Reaper.

My fingers tighten and I strangle her with the hoodie until her face goes red. "Going somewhere without saying goodbye, Cherry? I'm so wounded, I'll probably cry on my pillow later."

I loosen my hold but don't release her, and she coughs as she faces me, then breathes out, "Killer."

"Your killer for sure. Did you think I wouldn't find out about your stupid little games?"

"I...I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know exactly what he's talking about," Gareth snarls. "You used me to get to the club and get access to internal communication panels."

"Then you stole security footage and leaked it outside. Oh, and you invited Glyndon to the initiation through the internal panel with Gareth's access."

A fact that he admitted to me after I brought a battered Glyndon with me to the house. Apparently, he'd wanted to tell me this on the plane since he had his suspicions about who might have access to internal security records.

Jeremy and Nikolai's guards are more loyal than dogs since they were with their fathers for years. Those two are out.

So the most probable people are those from the club.

And the one Gareth has been getting in bed with is none other than the manipulative, on-crack Cherry.

We were able to fill in the blanks after that.

Cherry starts crying, her chin trembling and her eyes red. If I could give a fuck, it'd almost feel real.

Almost.

"I didn't want to," she sobs. "He...he made me do it. He knows about my drug addiction and if I didn't cooperate, he was going to tell Dad, who would lock me up in some rehab facility. I swear I didn't know he'd hurt Glyndon like that. I swear."

I yawn. "Tell that to someone who cares."

"Gareth." She grabs his arm with desperation bleeding in her voice, knowing full well he's the only one who'll be able to get her out of this. It surely isn't me. "I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't had to. You have to believe me."

He removes her hand and slings it away. "You used me once. Never again."

"Gareth, please. I love you."

"No, you don't," Gareth says with a half-smile. "I was just a substitute for Kill. You don't even love him. You love the idea of

him and the feelings of grandiosity it gives you.”

“That’s not true, I swear—”

“Shut the fuck up. Your whining is getting on my last fucking nerve and that’s not playing in your favor, Cherry.” I tilt my head. “You know what will? Giving me a name and a recount of events.”

She sneers, all pitiful-girl act vanished. “You’ll hurt me anyway, so why should I tell you?”

“At least you’re smart enough to figure that out. Keep up that energy and tell me what I want. There’s a huge difference between being sent to rehab and being sent to an unknown place, say underground, where you’ll slowly but surely go fucking mad and start eating your own shit. Oh, and I’ll make sure there are no guards you can seduce.”

Her lips tremble, an ugly expression taking over her face. “Why her and not me? I came first, I had you *first*.”

“Beats me. Probably the face. Hers is better than yours, even when bruised. And the voice. Glyndon’s is the sweetest I’ve ever heard. You know what? Everything. She has the aura of a queen while you’ll always be a lowly peasant, Cherry. When I looked at you in the past, I used to feel indifference, but now, I have this urge to crush your fucking skull, so tell me what I want before I start acting on those feelings.”

It takes her a few moments of futile struggling before she lays the whole situation out. From how she got close to Gareth and connived to be accepted into the Heathens to how she helped her brother receive an invitation the second time around. Obviously, he’s the one who shot at me with that arrow, and she tried to stop him.

She also tells me about the threatening text messages he kept sending to Glyndon all this time to keep her on the edge.

Her word vomit goes on and on about how her brother used to control her and blah fucking blah.

Then she mentions the name that makes me see even more red than earlier. Devlin Starlight.

The supposedly dead Devlin. I knew that motherfucker wasn’t the type who would commit suicide. He had too much destructive energy to fit a self-harming concept such as finishing his life.

I'm not easily surprised—if ever—but I was when I heard the news of his death. Which is why I constantly visited that cliff just to see that death up close.

I met a fucking angel instead.

Now that I know of his actions, I assume that his plan all along was to get me interested in Glyndon. The way he talked about his 'best friend' was filled with the right adjectives.

Innocent, sheltered, a princess.

Or the last thing he mentioned.

Sometimes she feels like someone who's waiting to be ruined.

I'm going to fuck up his life, not only for thinking he could manipulate me but also for daring to put his filthy hands on what's mine.

THE PLAN IS SIMPLE BUT BRUTAL.

At nightfall, Jeremy, Nikolai, Gareth, and I put on our neon, stitched face masks with the added anti-gas option and sneak into the Serpents' compound.

There's a pest following us around wearing his gold mask, but I ignore him.

If it were months or even weeks ago, we wouldn't dream of raiding their mansion. But Cherry played her part well, with some prodding from Gareth.

She's trying to get on his good side so we won't hand her back to her daddy on a silver platter. She's a survivor through and through and isn't above betraying her brother for it.

Needless to say, I made sure she was locked up with White as guard. She might be able to seduce any of our security guards, but never White. Once we're done here, I'll make sure her father's men take her out of the mansion.

Have fun in rehab, bitch.

Now, it's time to pay tribute to the other bitch, whose father's men will escort him to his coffin.

The mansion they use as a base is similar to ours, only a bit more gothic and smaller, like their dicks.

And tonight happens to be the night they pick a leader—as Cherry told us. Gareth, Landon, and I watch the security monitor after Jeremy and Nikolai knock out the guards.

All five leaders of the Serpents wear skull masks similar to the one I found on Glyndon earlier. They've formed a circle on some satanic star and are murmuring like fucking witches.

"Which one's Devlin?" Gareth asks.

"Their masks are similar, so I don't know." I shrug. "We'll just have to take them all."

"Yes, all." Nikolai's eyes gleam from behind his mask as he slaps his fist against his open palm. "I'll fuck them all up."

"All but Devlin," I say. "His life is mine."

"You mean mine," Landon tells me and I flip him off.

"As much as I like that idea," Jeremy intervenes, "that would be asking for war."

I raise a brow. "Didn't know war scared you."

"Not in the least. But some of you might not be ready for it."

"If you're agree to this plan, raise your hand," I say, then raise mine. Nikolai puts up both and Gareth follows. "Guess that concludes it."

We leave Gareth in the control room for any unwanted intervention, and he keeps in communication with us through earpieces.

Then the four of us follow his instructions to reach their basement where they're having their satanic rituals.

I pull up the plug on the metal canister and watch it roll toward them.

They all stare at it, then disperse in different directions when they figure out it's tear gas.

One of them falls to the ground, coughing, removing his mask. Nikolai kicks him in the jaw, sending him flying. "Hi, guys, nice to see you again. I've missed bloodying your pussy-ass faces."

He's not Devlin.

Jeremy and Landon split up, catching the others, beating them up and taking off their masks, but there's no sign of Devlin.

"Kill, behind you!" Gareth yells in my ear.

I swing around and raise my hand just in time for a baseball bat to fall on my arm.

A crack sounds in the air, crashing pain blinds my vision, and my arm falls limp.

Definitely broken.

The one wearing a skull gas mask laughs with the edge of a lunatic. "Hi there, Killian. You thought I wouldn't anticipate this?"

"Hi there, Devlin. Ready to meet your maker?" I kick him in the stomach, letting the useless arm swing at my side.

He *oomphs*, but he regains his footing and aims for my broken arm again.

This time, I dodge, and he laughs. "Does this scene mean you got my gift? I used special care to wrap her up in beautiful bruises for you. She looked exquisite."

This time, I'm the one who bursts out laughing so loudly and maniacally that he pauses. It goes on for so long that he gets angry and starts aiming at me without a strategy.

"Such a weak little boy." I dodge. "Mommy didn't love you, did she? Abandoned you while you were small and helpless, so now, you've turned into a man-child."

"Shut the fuck up." His anger rises and rises, and he falls straight into my lap.

"What a shame. She'd take a rope to her throat if she saw your current state. Oh, right. She already did."

"I said to shut the fuck up!" He swings and I catch the bat with my good arm, wrench it from his hold, and swiftly hit him in the head.

He releases a haunted, pained sound as he drops to the ground. He crawls, then rises to his feet, but the moment he's up, I slam the wood against his legs over and over until gurgles are the only sounds he can make.

I slowly remove his mask, making him cough and choke on the tear gas, then I peer down on him. "Don't faint on me yet. We're only just getting started. You're going to bleed and scream and beg for every mark you left on her skin. You'll be cut for every lie you told her and for having the audacity to use her good nature. You'll pray to every deity on earth, but I'll be your custom-made merciless god. I might not process emotions normally, but if you hurt what's mine, I'll be the one to spit on your fucking grave."

I have not a shadow of a doubt that the little rabbit is flipping
my world upside down.

And I'll let her.

Because she's mine.

And I'll set the whole fucking world on fire to make sure she
remains safe.

GLYNDON

It hurts.

That's the first thought that comes to mind when I open my eyes—or more accurately, my eye.

The other one feels swollen and remains half-shut.

It isn't only my flesh that aches. The pain has ripped through tendons and reached the marrow of my bones.

My tongue stays glued to the roof of my mouth, feeling big, heavy, and absolutely foreign.

I expect to find myself on the top of that cliff, but soft light greets me, followed by the very distinctive scent of amber wood. Sure enough, the impersonal wallpaper from Killian's room slowly comes into focus.

"Glyn?" Bran's concerned face comes into view. "How are you feeling?"

"In pain," I groan.

"Here, have some painkillers." He fetches a pill from the nightstand and helps me sit up to take it.

My head throbs as I swallow down the medication. Bran sits down on the bed and his movements are foggy, disconnected almost.

"I was so worried about you." He carefully touches my arm. "Do you need anything?"

I shake my head, feeling the discomfort subside a little. "Where's Killian?"

His expression loses all softness. "He went after the one who did this to you."

"No..." I let out in a breath.

"Unfortunately, yes. Lan went with him, and all his club's leaders, naturally."

I throw off the cover and attempt to stand. Obviously, I overestimate my ability to move because I fall right back down.

Bran catches me before I hit the floor and forces me back on the bed. "What on earth do you think you're doing?"

"I have to stop them. They're playing right into his hands. He did this to lure both Killian and Lan out, to start a war and instigate chaos. I don't want to be the reason for that, Bran."

"I think it's already too late, little princess."

A lump catches at the back of my throat and I don't know if I want to scream or cry.

The door opens and we both turn to find Killian standing there, one arm limp by his side. Splashes of blood cover his hand, neck, and the collar of his shirt, but his face appears clean, ethereal.

Twisted.

This is how I imagine serial killers look when they go home, completely detached, probably even elated due to satisfying their bloodlust.

He slides his bloodied fingers through his hair as if affirming the image I just had.

This is the part where I should feel scared, terrified, but my heart breaks instead.

Without the rose-colored glasses, I can clearly see where this is headed. Or maybe I did see it, but I kept lying to myself.

Upon catching sight of me, he pauses in his tracks, and a light shines in his eyes as he reaches me in a few steps.

I'll never get used to how all-encompassing Killian's presence is. How he's able to eat up my attention without even trying.

When he's close, I lose sense of anything else. My whole being floods to him the way ravens congregate to ominous places.

Bran makes way for him and mouths that he'll be right outside.

Killian doesn't even seem to notice that my brother has left the room and closed the door as he sits on the bed, taking my hand in his. His thumb—bloodied thumb—strokes the back of it. His

other hand remains unmoving, hanging by his side. "Do you feel better? Have you taken painkillers?"

I nod soundlessly, my chest aching with each breath I take as I whisper, "Did you kill him?"

The apparent softness disappears, letting his demons rear their ugly heads. "What if I did?"

My stomach drops and the breaking sound of my heart from earlier gets louder, deafening even. I try to pull my hand away from his, but he only tightens his fingers.

"Don't. You know full well that I don't like it when you slam the door in my face."

"And you think I like it when I see you all bloody like this?"

"Did you expect me to stay still after he dared not only to touch you but to also fucking beat you?"

"No, but I thought you'd beat him, maybe, and God knows he'd deserve it, but not that you would kill him. I thought you'd think about it from my perspective. If you had, then you would've realized the guilt of being behind someone's death would crush me."

"How about my perspective then? You're the one who keeps my demons at bay, the one who makes me look forward to new days. You're the only red in my black-and-white world. You're my fucking *purpose*, but he hurt you. He put his hands on what belongs to me. On *my* girl." He wraps a hand around my throat. It's not harsh, just enough to tell me who's in control. "Listen to me and listen to me well, Glyndon. I spent my whole life repressing my true nature, but I'd willingly embrace my demons for you. I'd turn into the devil, a monster, and whatever weapon I have to be if it means I can protect you. You will never, *ever* question me about it, do you hear me?"

My chin trembles despite my attempts to lock my jaw. "So I have to watch you become inhumane and remain quiet about it?"

"When it comes to your safety, yes. Also, I didn't kill Devlin, but he'll sure as fuck wish for death during the months of rehab he'll have to undergo to be functioning again." He tsks. "And your brother took some of my fun by insisting to participate in the torture. Did I mention that I can't stand him?"

My lips part. "You...really let Devlin live?"

"For now."

"Why?"

"Because I plan to make his life hell. I'll wait until he's all recovered and beat him up again. He'll tremble in fear at the mere mention of my name, he'll look behind his back and have an army as security, but none of them will stop me. I'll become his custom-made nightmare."

My mouth becomes dry, but I still ask, "Is that all?"

He releases a long breath and strokes my throat. "I also didn't want you to feel guilty for a life I took for your sake. Because, unlike your claims, I do think from your perspective. And I'm also well aware that if I take one life, I'll need to feel that rush again and again, until I get caught for it. While that option might have been negotiable in the past, it's absolutely not a possibility now since it means I'd have to leave you."

I snort. "I don't know if I should feel special or horrified."

He releases my throat and tucks a stray hair behind my ear. "Definitely the first."

"Am I special?"

"If you weren't, would I waste my time trying to see things from your perspective? I'm not an altruistic man, never was and never will be, but you're part of me now, so I'll get used to thinking the way you do."

My previously broken heart, the heart that thought Killian crossed the line and that I'd have to ask Grandpa and even Lan to lock me away from him, has been slowly reviving back to life. It's beating harshly now, as if the rush of oxygen is too much for it to handle.

As if this is all a pipe dream.

I try to speak, but I'm so choked up that it takes me a few attempts. "Do you mean that, or are you only saying it because you know I want to hear it?"

"Quit questioning everything I say or do. It really gets on my last nerve. Yes, I'm manipulative, but not with you. I have always been direct about what I want from you."

"And what is that?"

"You being mine. I'll give you the world in return."

"The world?" A tear slides down my cheek. "What defines the world to you, Kill? Because for me, it's waking up next to the man I love and being sure that he loves me, too. I don't know when or how it happened, but I know that I fell in love with you. So hard that it hurts to know you'll never feel the same."

"Who says I never will?"

"Your nature. It's not that you don't want to change, it's that you genuinely can't."

"Don't go putting labels on me. See, what I gather about love is that it's noble, tender, and means if you love someone enough, you may have to let them go. Understand this, Glyndon, there's nothing noble or tender about what I feel for you. It's a violent volcano of obsession, possession, and deranged lust. If you want love, then I do love you, but it's the unorthodox version of love. I love you enough to let you within my walls. I love you enough to let you talk to my demons. I love you enough to allow you to have a hold over me when I've never allowed anyone to have the power to destroy me from the inside out."

My heart beats so hard, I think it's attempting to fly out of my chest and somehow fuse with his.

This can't be learned behavior, not when his eyes are molten lava and he looks at me with an intensity that steals my breath.

"Killian..."

"Don't even think about doubting my words again."

"I wasn't... I'm just touched."

"Of course you are. I bet you like the tidbit about how you hold power over me."

"It's only fair with all the power you hold over me." I lift a hand and stroke his cheek, smiling, then wincing when my lip throbs.

He doesn't seem to like that, considering the way his brows dip. Then he takes my hand and kisses my palm, eliciting a shudder from deep within my soul. "I promise I'll never allow anyone to hurt you again."

I believe him.

With the blood on his fingers and hand, it sounds more sinister, but it's all a part of Killian. And when I fell for him, I had to take the whole package.

The good, the ugly, and the fucked-up.

"Are you sure you won't get bored of me, after all?" I poke.

"Oh, baby. Not even after death."

I smile because I know he means every word. "Good, because guess what?"

"What?"

I lean over and whisper, "I'm yours."

His nostrils flare and a muscle clenches in his jaw. "Repeat that."

"I'm yours, Killian. I think I've been yours since we first met."

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I lean against his chest slowly so that I don't trigger my injuries.

No clue where we go from here, but I'm ready for the world Killian sets at my feet.

I'm also ready to grow into the courageous girl I become when I'm with him.

LEVI

THREE WEEKS LATER

I sit beside my uncle on the leather sofa in my office while my boys stand behind us with the stance of rookie soldiers.

Or Bran does. Lan has been exuding the type of destructive energy that gets people killed.

All four of us are staring at the person who's sitting in the chair across from us. Despite having a plaster cast covering his right arm, he still looks nonchalantly presentable in dark trousers and a button-down.

His hair is styled, his expression resembles a wise monk's, and he has all the indications to pass as a respectable human.

But I know better.

I never thought there would be a day when I'd be talking to the guy who's sleeping with my daughter.

Scratch that, I've thought of it ever since Astrid and I learned we were expecting a baby girl, and the image always, without doubt, blurred my vision.

Is it too late to ask some witch to take us back in time so my daughter can remain forever young? Because I'm having a hard time coming to terms with this.

Uncle's state is even worse, but his expression is more in the calculative range. Apparently, he meant it when he suggested beating this fucker to shreds and sending him back to the States with a one-way ticket.

An option I'm not entirely opposed to as it'd mean I'd get rid of the guy Glyndon so brazenly introduced to us with, "Mum, Dad, meet my boyfriend, Killian."

Yes, she's had boyfriends before but didn't feel the need to bring them home. Also, I knew they kept their distance because Lan made sure of it. Apparently, he can't with this Killian.

"Levi," Uncle speaks to me without breaking eye contact with Killian. "Don't you think this chap is shameless enough to show his face in your house after he broke Glyndon's heart?"

"Indeed, Uncle. He could've stayed away and avoided us, but he apparently thought paying us a visit was the right thing to do."

"Who's going to tell him that his parents might not recognize him when we're done with him?"

"Let's not beat him too much, Uncle. You're acquainted with his father, after all." I let my eyes fall on Killian, who's been following the entire conversation with the same blank expression. "Tell you what, kid. If you break up with Glyndon, and she knows it's all your doing, we'll spare you the torture."

"With all due respect, sir, those threats don't work on me," the little shit says with a small smile. "You should ask Landon here. He tried worse and failed."

"I didn't fail if I haven't stopped trying," Landon says. "And you should listen to Dad because he's offering you the easy way out."

"I most definitely am," I say. "Uncle, under different circumstances, how do we deal with someone who thinks he can be with my daughter after he broke her heart?"

"Correction." Killian raises a brow. "I didn't break her heart. She thought I did after seeing a clip from a cut video in which I told a fake friend of hers that he could drop dead. What she didn't see is the rest of the footage where he asked me what would I tell him if he wanted to die. And afterward, when he laughed and said maybe he'd take someone with him. That someone was Glyndon, by the way. He wanted to drive himself with her off the cliff, but she escaped at the last minute. Due to his actions, she felt horrible for months, thinking she failed him when he needed her the most and that was why he committed suicide. As I'm sure Landon and Brandon told you, he didn't die, but he's currently wishing for death."

I raise an eyebrow at the sure, assertive way he speaks. It's a startling, absolutely appalling reminder of how my cousin was when he was around this fucker's age.

Uncle must've made the connection, too, because his lips tighten in a line. "Landon tells me you have a history of violence, boy."

"And so does he, but you don't see me airing his dirty laundry for everyone to see. If I must say, it doesn't look good on you, Landon."

I can feel the tension radiating from my eldest son, but Bran pats his shoulder—or maybe grabs it in an attempt to stop him from going off like a bullet.

Among the four of us, Bran is definitely the only one who's on the little shit's side.

"Glyndon already chose him, Dad, and he makes her happy, so maybe you shouldn't intervene," is what he told me earlier.

Like fuck I won't intervene.

The more I talk to him, the less I like him.

I simply did not raise my only daughter all these years to eventually hand her over to this sod.

"Look, I understand your reservations about me," he continues in a serious tone. "But my use of violence was in my teens when my impulse control needed more work. Now, the only violence I indulge in is when I have to protect Glyndon. It is never directed at her or her friends and family."

"Those are some pretty words," Uncle says.

"I mean every one of them and I promise that I'll keep her safe with my life."

"That's if you don't *accidentally* lose your life in the meantime," Landon mutters.

"Now, Landon." I try to sound stern. "No threatening in front of outsiders. It could be used against you later."

Killian merely smiles as if he didn't hear the last bits of dialogue. "Glyndon said it'd be difficult for you to accept me, but I'm willing to try to get your approval for her sake—minus you, Landon. I don't give a fuck about your opinion. Mr. and Mr. King, I respect you for bringing Glyndon up all these years. In fact, I tip my hat to you for protecting her during the time I wasn't in her life, but know this—you'll never be able to take her away from me. You can break my legs and arms, but I can still crawl toward her."

"So you're telling us that you're not backing away from my daughter?"

"Not even close, not even a little."

"Very well." Uncle stands. "I'll keep an eye on you, boy. Make that eyes, plural, and if I find out that you've hurt my princess in any way, I'll make sure you never breathe properly again."

"Here's a piece of advice, Killian—the only one I'll offer you. If you do cause pain to my daughter, you might want to voluntarily disappear, because I'll kill you when I find you."

"Please do. You have permission to do whatever you wish if I do cross a line, but you are not permitted to intervene or sabotage our relationship."

"Are you threatening us?" I ask.

"Of course not." He smiles in that annoying way. "I'm just relaying a piece of information."

Uncle stares at him, then walks out, and I follow after, leaving my sons with the vermin.

As we step out, I can hear Killian and Landon exchanging passive-aggressive remarks while Brandon tries to cool off the atmosphere.

"I need you to watch that boy closely, Levi," Uncle says once we're down the hall.

"You don't have to tell me. What are the chances of Glyndon actually leaving the bastard?"

"Zero. She said she's in love with him and that he makes her a better, more courageous person."

The little fucking shit.

"As if that isn't enough, Aurora already likes him and says I'm being too overprotective."

"Nonsense. There's no such thing when it comes to Glyndon."

"That's what I said."

"If it's of any consolation, Astrid has been running a campaign in his favor for weeks now. She even warned me not to be difficult or talk to him as if he's a criminal. Doesn't she know that I won't hand my daughter over without some hard shaking?"

"We are not handing her over. We're observing his actions for now."

"Maybe they'll break up in a few months and we'll be done with this whole charade."

Uncle releases a sigh. "I wouldn't be so hopeful if I were you. They're both in too deep. Just because you refuse to see it doesn't mean it's not there."

I curse beneath my breath as we reach the dining room. Aurora, who was overlooking the staff in setting the table, smiles upon seeing us and leaves them to it.

"So?" She watches us. "Have you tortured the poor boy enough?"

"The bad news is that it's impossible to torture him," Uncle says. "The good news is that we know his weakness is Glyndon."

"Oh, Jonathan." She links her arm with his. "Let them be. Young love is so beautiful."

Uncle and I share a look because, holy fuck, that's almost the same thing Astrid said earlier.

Speaking of my wife, I leave Uncle and Aurora and head to her favorite place, after our bed.

Sure enough, when I open the door to her art studio, I find her standing in the middle of it with Glyndon.

I'm used to being unnoticeable when I come here, so I don't interrupt her creative time. Sometimes, I watch her for hours, just to see her in focus mode. Other times, I feel like she needs a break and serve as a distraction. Those occasions often end up with me fucking her in the midst of her brushes and palettes, and usually results in us looking like a mess.

It's been almost three decades since I met this woman and I still feel that rush of blood to my head—and my cock—whenever I look at her.

It doesn't matter how old we grow, she's still the woman who tames my wild side, brings light to my darkness and peace to my days.

She's still the freest spirit I've ever seen.

Right now, she's clutching Glyn by the shoulder as they stare at a chaotic black-and-red painting on the wall.

I say chaotic because I'm artistically illiterate, as Astrid and our sons like to tell me. It's only Glyn who says, "It's okay, Dad, you don't have to understand art to feel it."

Because she's special, my little Glyndon. Compassionate to a fault, too. Like her mother.

Only she's not little anymore and she's bringing a headstrong boyfriend home that I get irritated about whenever he comes to mind.

"Why didn't you show me this before?" Astrid asks her, a soft frown etched between her brows.

Glyndon slides her palm down her shorts. When they're standing side by side, they look so similar and yet so different. They're the same height, have the same eyes, but everything else sets them apart.

My wife has mature beauty, the type that's honed by years of being a badass businesswoman, artist, wife, and most importantly, mother.

I would've never been able to be a good father if she wasn't the mother of my children. She understands the difference between the three of them and does her best not to squash it.

She never dressed Landon and Brandon in the same clothes. Not even once.

And when people told her they'd look cute in similar clothes, she said that she wasn't ready to sacrifice their sense of identity just so everyone would think they were cute.

"I guess I didn't think it was good enough," Glyn says. "Bran wasn't supposed to show you this."

"He didn't. I actually snuck into your art studio. I know, I know. I shouldn't have, but you haven't shown me anything for almost a year." She tightens her fingers on our daughter's shoulder. "And this isn't only good enough, it's an emotive masterpiece. The first time I saw it, I had tears in my eyes from the flow of emotions."

"R-really?"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"Thanks." Her voice shakes. "You don't know how much that means to me."

"Not everyone is going to like what you put out and that's okay, Glyn. Just tune out other people's opinions and only focus on your art. That's if you still want to continue down this path."

"Of course, I do."

"You always expressed yourself the best with a brush in hand and a wicked grin on your lips."

Glyn chuckles, then hugs her mother. "Thanks, Mum, really. For everything."

Astrid pats her back with a loving expression on her face. "Does that mean you'll show me your creations from now on?"

"I will."

"Good. Now, tell me what you were thinking about when you did this one?"

Glyn smiles sheepishly. "A beautiful nightmare."

"I like that."

"Me, too."

"Also, I spoke to Professor Skies since Landon told me he's giving you a hard time."

"Lan did?"

"Yeah," Astrid says slowly. "But the weird thing is, Professor Skies said he already got a visit from some masked man who threatened him that if he continues to bother you, he better start counting his days. Be honest with me. Do you think that was Lan?"

Glyn releases a breath and shakes her head. "And here I was wondering why he suddenly changed his attitude toward me. He even praised my painting in front of the whole class, which is something he's never done before. Now I know it's all because of the threat, and no, Mum, I don't think it was Lan."

"Oh, okay. If your oldest brother causes any trouble, you'll let me know, right?"

"No, Mum, I'm sorry, but I won't. And neither will Bran, actually. Lan is a big boy. He can handle himself without you monitoring him."

"Glyndon! Where did you learn the habit of talking back?"

"I just...feel better when I say everything out loud instead of burying it inside."

My wife smiles. "Well, it's about time. I'm proud of you, baby. And I'm so happy you found someone who understands and loves you the way you are."

A faint blush covers her cheeks. "You think Killian loves me?"

"Loves you? No, it's more than that. He looks like he's ready to wreak havoc for you, and believe me when I say that type of love is rare to find."

"You think?"

"I'm sure."

"That would be one of us." I choose this moment to stroll inside and then wrap a hand around my wife's waist.

She fits perfectly in my arms. This woman was made for me and I refuse to think otherwise.

"Dad." Glyn sulks. "Why would you say that?"

"Because he's a little psycho, that's why. Imagine what he'll become when he grows up."

"Aiden?" Astrid asks with a mischievous smile. "You still love him."

"*Tolerate* him, not love him, princess."

"Oh, please. You've been overprotective of Aiden since you were kids. Either way, Aiden is the type of man who puts his family above the world, so don't be judgmental."

"Yeah, Dad, don't be judgmental."

"We're playing two on one now, are we?"

"Well, you put yourself in this position," Astrid tells me, shamelessly taking our daughter's side.

"Still love you, Dad." Glyn pecks my cheek, then grins. "I'll get going before you start kissing."

Her laugh echoes in the air as she leaves the studio.

My wife slides her hand up my ribs and to my chest, a glimmering light shining in her eyes. "Are we going to start kissing, my king?"

It only takes a few strokes from her to transform me into a raging volcano. "Not sure. You just took that fucker Killian's side over mine."

"Because you're being unreasonable and you know it. He brought our daughter back from the edge and that alone makes me forever thankful." Her hand travels to my cheek, her voice softening when she says, "Are you really not going to kiss me?"

"I'd never say no to you, princess." I'd lose to her over and over if I have to.

My fingers lift her chin and my mouth meets hers. I kiss her with gratefulness, love, and the absolute need to have her in my life.

She *is* my life.

My wife.

The mother of my children.

Mine.

LEVI: I JUST LOST MY DAUGHTER.

Xander: Please tell me that's figurative and Glyn is actually okay?

Levi: If by okay, you mean breathing, then sure, she's okay. But she brought home a boy and said the dreaded words of "I love him."

Aiden: Surely you knew she'd do this eventually? She's fucking nineteen, Lev, not nine.

Levi: Says the one who only has sons. You don't understand, so how about you kindly fuck off?

Aiden: What's so wrong with having sons? Don't be jealous.

Ronan: Agreed. Sons are the shit. Also, I'm on pins and needles for when Remi will introduce his special someone to us.

Cole: From what I gather, there will be special *someones*. I wonder where he got that womanizing tendency from.

Ronan: Fuck you, Nash. My son is living his life as a healthy uni student and I won't allow anyone to shame him.

Xander: My condolences about Glyn, Captain. It's my worst nightmare to imagine some fucker taking away my Cecily.

Aiden: Hello? They're old enough to be independent, so can we normalize letting them live their lives?

Cole: Except for my Ariella. She's only sixteen. My Ava is off-limits, too. Do you hear that, Aiden? Let Eli know.

Aiden: You're so delusional to think you can stop Eli from doing anything. Even I can't dictate his actions anymore.

Cole: We'll see about that. Don't blame me for the violence that will happen when he comes near my daughter.

Ronan: Let me bring the popcorn.

Cole: You, too, Ron. Keep your son far away from my Ari.

Ronan: I should be the one to say that, fucker. She's like a little hellion stalker. Jesus, I'm scared for Remi's life.

Levi: You can brush me off all you like, but I'll be the one laughing when you're the ones who lose your kids.

EPILOGUE - GLYNDON

THREE MONTHS LATER

"Are you drunk?"

I stare up at Killian with a wide grin and squint an eye.

"Did you know you sound so hot when you're angry?"

"Glyndon," he grinds out.

"You sound hot when you say my name, too."

He taps a finger against the counter, obviously waiting for a reply.

"What? I only had, like, two drinks. Right, Niko?" I stare at my partner in crime as we sit on the kitchen counter while Gareth mixes us some drinks.

Okay, maybe there was more alcohol than I divulged, but it's all Killian's fault. I got bored waiting for him to come home from his shift at the hospital, so when Nikolai started drinking, I joined him.

And I still waited, because it's, like, eleven p.m. now, and I'm tired and I have an early class tomorrow. But I couldn't go back to the dorm, because this bastard has totally trained me to only sleep on top of him.

Or that's what I tell myself.

The sad truth is, I've been falling head over heels for this man over the past few months, and I've been enjoying every second.

Killian will always be Killian, with his unorthodox methods, brooding personality, and bleak mind, but he smirks when he sees me, he kisses my forehead after he pleases me. He fucks me like he can't breathe without me.

He shows me parts of himself that the world isn't privy to, like the photographs he's been taking over the years. Lately, his red room has been filled with pictures of us, or more specifically, me. In all different positions. During sex. Outside of sex. When I'm looking. When I'm not looking.

He said I'm his masterpiece.

I don't even have to worry about other people, because he sees no one but me. I know because the other day, I went to surprise him at med school so we could have lunch together and a girl was practically rubbing her breasts against his arm while he was reading from a textbook.

He simply placed a hand on her forehead and pushed her away as if she were a pest—without breaking his focus from his task.

When I'm around, he finds it hard to focus on anything else—his words, not mine.

Only when I was a few steps away did he look up with that heart-stopping smirk. It's seriously bad for my health at this point.

He's definitely not smirking now. In fact, his eyes narrow the slightest bit. "What did I say about getting drunk when I'm not around? And the motherfucker's name is Nikolai."

"I say, are you jealous that Glyn and I are bonding, Satan's heir?" His cousin points a half-empty shot glass in his direction, a shit-eating grin curling his mouth.

Killian completely ignores him, then wraps an arm around my back and effortlessly throws me over his shoulder.

Jeez.

This caveman behavior will be the death of me one day.

But I still giggle as the blood rushes to my head and I hold on to his back.

"I love the feel of your muscles," I slur, stroking my hands wherever I can reach.

He grunts, the sound low and sexy, or maybe I'm just horny right now. "Fucking alcohol."

Then he grabs a pillow on the way to the stairs and throws it at Nikolai, hitting him in the back of the head.

Gareth chuckles.

Nikolai jumps up. "What the fucking fuck is wrong with you, motherfucker? Stop throwing shit at me."

Killian doesn't even look at him as he continues up the stairs and into his bedroom.

He lays me on the bed gently and I whine in response as I lift myself on my elbows. I pause when I catch the scene of him removing his T-shirt to reveal those stone-hard abs and the hauntingly beautiful crow tattoos. Then, he kicks away his trousers so that only his boxers remain.

I'll never get used to his physical perfection and the fact that it's all mine.

Or to how happy I've been for the last couple of months.

Killian climbs onto the bed, lifts me on top of him, and closes his eyes.

I roll so my stomach meets his half-awake erection and I rest my chin on my interlinked hands on his chest.

Dark circles line his eyes and he appears tired, more so than usual.

He has loads of classes in med school this year, and as if that isn't enough, the whole war thing between the clubs is getting worse.

I hate that Devlin got what he wanted and instigated chaos between everyone. As a result, the guys have a lot more on their plates lately. Jeremy is almost never around due to how busy he is, and Nikolai and Gareth only got tonight off so they can drink.

Everyone thinks Killian is a machine who doesn't get tired no matter how many tasks he takes on, but he's human.

He gets injured—like that broken arm—and while he's a genius, he's definitely not a robot.

"Are you tired?" I murmur.

"I'm not tired." His voice rumbles against my chest, but he doesn't open his eyes. "I'm pissed off at you for drinking with the assholes when I wasn't around."

"It's just drinking."

"It's just you speaking erotically for God knows how long. I turn murderous at the thought of anyone imagining you during sex."

Right. He gets impossible at the thought of anyone else touching me. To this day, he's still searching for the owner of the hand I posted on IG. No kidding, every time he meets someone from my family or acquaintances, he checks their hands.

Thank God Moses usually wears gloves.

I stroke his chest. "I didn't think about it from that perspective."

"Then start to."

"Maybe Nikolai was right."

This time, he opens one eye. "About?"

"He said I'm so special to you that it's scary to imagine how you'd be without me."

"I don't have to, because there won't be me without you, little rabbit."

My heart does that wild flip again, the one where I feel it'll break the skin from the spur of emotions.

Before I can form a reply, he continues, "And aren't you getting comfortable talking about me behind my back?"

"You do that with Bran all the time. Also, I don't really have to ask with Anni. She'll provide any information and then some if you just give her a topic. She told me you're brutal."

"Annika should worry about herself, because she'll see what brutal is once Jeremy finds out about her little crush."

"Heeey! Don't tell him. Besides, it's not like Creigh is interested in her. Though I'm not sure about that anymore. They've been acting weird lately, like *suuuper* weird."

A dark look passes his now open eyes. "Stay out of it."

"What? Why?"

"Just stay out of their business. Believe me, it's bloody."

I narrow my eyes, somehow feeling like he's withholding information from me.

Then again, he's close with Jeremy, so of course he'd be on his side, not Anni's. But why do I feel like there's more to the story?

He closes his eyes again. "Now, sleep."

"But I don't want to sleep."

"Sleep or I fuck you. And it's not going to be a gentle fuck. I will make you scream, then muffle your voice so no one hears."

I gulp, but it's not out of dread. My core clenches and pleasure pools between my thighs.

Deep inside this man lurks a cold-blooded monster that's often luring him to the edge. He says I keep him from taking the fall.

Before me, he used to be an aimless monster.

Now, he's my monster.

And that first unconventional encounter was how I was supposed to meet him.

I was too lethargic, too out of it to even consider anyone. I hated life and myself, and that event brought back my senses in a painful outburst.

My shrink would say I'm finding excuses. I say, I found myself through this devil.

Not all girls like the hero. I was fated to fall in love with the villain.

Because I know, I just know that he'll put me ahead of everyone. Himself included.

So I grab his face and slam my lips to his. I'm not usually this forthcoming about sex or affection, mostly because I love when he takes what he wants.

It's how we function.

But right now, I want to kiss him, to show him that even if I fight, I've never for once not wanted him.

I always have.

Always.

He grunts as he bites my lower lip in his mouth and then flips us over, a hand around my throat.

"I gave you a way out, but you went ahead and refused it. Now, you're truly fucked, baby."

"Who says I want a way out?" I grin.

"That's my girl. Now, tell me what I want to hear."

My palm meets his cheek. "I'm yours, my monster."

"And I'm yours, little rabbit."

And then he shows me just how much we belong to each other.

EPILOGUE - KILLIAN

TWO YEARS LATER

I've come to the realization that there are too many irritating people in my and Glyndon's life.

More specifically, people who think it's such a great idea to steal her time from me.

My tolerance level concerning that is slowly but surely fading out, and I can't be held responsible for the hell that will break loose when I reach my limit.

In fact, that limit was fully breached around two years ago, soon after we started our relationship, but I made the mistake of promising to see things from her perspective.

At that time, it was the only thing that would make her trust me enough to be with me. But now, I have to accept that she actually needs friends.

That she wants to be recognized for who she is.

That as much as I want to spend every waking moment buried deep inside her or just holding her in my arms, she needs something as blasphemous as going out with friends and colleagues and all the fucking charade.

But I understand.

Not really.

Not even fucking close.

However, I let her have those irritating things, mainly because she misses me and I like how proactive she gets when she misses me.

Like tonight.

I haven't seen her for a day, and while that was nothing short of torture, I had something to plan.

Earlier, I told her to meet me at the top of the cliff, then I hid behind the tree.

And waited.

Glyn comes fifteen minutes early and kills the engine of her car near the road but doesn't turn off her headlights.

My little rabbit walks straight to the cliff, her hips swaying gently. She's wearing a denim jacket and a dress today—one that reaches the middle of her thighs and swishes with every move. She even put on red lipstick—my favorite fucking color.

Glyndon is the most beautiful woman on earth to me. Every time I look at her, I'm reminded of the difference she made in my life.

If it weren't for her, I would've long since spiraled down a destructive, criminal path and I would've never opened up to my family and found some middle ground with them.

Gareth and I won't get the Brothers of the Year award, and I'll never be mushy with my dad, but we sit down and talk. We even went back to hunting. The only activity the three of us do together—despite Mom's dislike of the hobby.

Glyndon stops not far from the cliff, looking around, probably searching for me. The air is gentle tonight—no wind or crashing of waves.

Her hair covers her face as she retrieves her phone. Soon after, my phone vibrates in my pocket. It's probably a text from her, asking if I'm here yet.

Instead of replying with words, I open the huge container I brought with me.

Soft yellow light slowly brightens the gloomy cliff as the fireflies swarm in the air.

Glyndon stares up and her phone is forgotten as she gets caught in a trance. I love it when she's in awe, when her lips part and her eyes widen. It's like when I'm pounding inside her and she can't take it anymore but she still enjoys every second of it.

The yellow light forms a halo around her as I sneak up behind her. The moment she feels my breath on her neck, she startles and turns around so fast that she slips backward.

Blindly, she clutches my chest with both hands, and her phone clatters to the ground.

"This scene is oddly similar to the first time we met," I whisper.

"You scared me," she breathes out, definitely not as frightened as back then.

"Do you trust me, baby?"

She pauses, her breathing quickening before she releases me. I reach out and pull her back with a hand around her waist.

Her chest flattens against mine as she grins. "Does that answer your question?"

I grind my jaw. "Don't do that again."

"Then don't ask stupid questions again. Why would I stay with you all this time if I didn't trust you?"

"My charm?"

"You don't even know the meaning of that word."

"You love me?"

She sighs, shaking her head. "Unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?"

"Yeah, I could've picked anyone else, but it had to be you."

"Damn straight." I stroke her hair away from her face. "You're here early."

"Well, remember that unfortunate thing about how much I love you? Due to that reason, I actually miss you when I don't see you for a certain amount of time."

"That's very unfortunate, indeed."

"But the view is worth the wait. How did you manage to get all these fireflies here?"

"I just did. Do I deserve a reward for all the hard work?"

"Did you do it to impress me or for a reward?"

"Both."

She smiles, shaking her head. "What do you want as a reward?"

"Marry me, Glyndon."

Her smile remains frozen. "W-what?"

"I want you to marry me."

"We're like twenty-one and you still haven't finished your education, and I want to continue my master's degree. When I say what, I mean, are you serious?"

"When have I not been? We can get married after we're settled in our careers if you want, but in the meantime, you'll wear my ring on your finger."

She seems to have come down from the shock, and a rare gleam covers her eyes. "When did you even plan this?"

"After I took you to see my parents. Surely I would marry the first girl I introduced to my folks."

She narrows her eyes. "Was that before or after anal?"

I grin. "During, baby."

She tries to hide her smile but fails. "Bloody perv."

"Is that a yes?"

"You didn't even ask."

"If I ask, it means you'll get to say no, and you know I don't take that for an answer. Not about this."

She wraps her arms around my neck. "I think I'm doomed."

"Why is that?"

"Because I think you're the only man I would marry."

"You just figured that out?"

"Oh, shut up." She laughs and kisses my cheek. "I'll marry you, my monster."

"Good." I slip the custom-made ring with my name on it on her finger. "You're officially mine now."

She stares at it under the fireflies' light. "It's so beautiful. Thank you."

"I have a better way for you to show me your gratitude." I grab her by the arm and pull her with me.

She has to jog to keep up with my pace, and usually, I'd slow down, but right now, I'm too impatient for this woman.

I need to be inside her more than I need my next hit of oxygen.

Once we reach a tree, I slam her against it—not hard enough to hurt her, but enough that she can figure out my intention.

Glyndon swallows. "We're in public, Killian."

I grab her by the hips and pull her against my erection. "So? We need to celebrate our engagement." I slide my other hand under her dress. "Besides, the red lipstick is a clear invitation to fuck that mouth, and you already wore a dress so I could have better access to your cunt, didn't you?"

My fingers find her pussy and I pause. "What do we have here, my little slut? No panties?"

"I told you I missed you," she breathes out.

"You're driving me fucking crazy, baby." I tease her clit, and her head falls back against the tree with a moan. "Wrap your leg around my waist. Hold on to me."

Both of her arms and a leg circle my neck and waist, but she still whispers, "Anyone can see."

"Not if they want to stay alive." I free my raging hard cock and lift her other leg. "Eyes on me when I fuck you, baby."

Her eyes meet mine, half-hooded, almost closed, but they're so full of fire, I want to walk straight through it and feel every burn.

I drive inside her with the impatience of a celibate priest. She clenches around my cock with a gasp, her body molding to mine.

Maybe I should make her miss me more in the future. On second thought, no. I'm still going through withdrawal after only one day.

My fingers wrap around her neck and she tightens her hold on me. She likes it when I choke her while I'm fucking her brains out, my Glyndon. She told me it makes her lose control more, because it's me.

Because she *trusts* me.

I up my rhythm until her moans and gasps of pleasure echo around us, swirling with the fireflies and the silence of the night.

"You're going to be my wife." *Thrust*. "My partner." *Thrust*. "My everything."

"Yes, yes." Her voice is broken by the strength of my powering into her.

"One day, I'll stuff this cunt with my cum and you'll give me children, won't you, baby?"

Her eyes shine as she moans, "Yes!"

Her orgasm hits me with a mixture of emotions. Maybe it's the surrender of it, or the fact that she's now wearing my ring, or that nothing and no one will take her away from me. Or maybe it's the promise that I'll fill her with my baby in the future.

Whatever the reason, I spill all the way inside her with a grunt.

Glyndon grabs onto me, her fingers stroking my cheek as a girly, happy smile covers her lips. "I love you, my monster."

"And I love you, baby."

More than she'll ever comprehend, think, or know.

I love her to the point of fucking madness.

THE END

Next up is the following book in Legacy of Gods, *God of Pain*.

You can check out the books of the couples that appeared in this book:

Asher & Reina Carson: *Lies & Truths Duet*.

Levi & Astrid King: *Cruel King*.

Jonathan & Aurora King: *Kingdom Duet*.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Thank you so much for reading *God of Malice*! If you liked it, please leave a review.

Your support means the world to me.

If you're thirsty for more discussions with other readers of the series, you can join the Facebook group, [*Rina Kent's Spoilers Room*](#).

Next up is a complete standalone in Legacy of Gods series, [*God of Pain*](#).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rina Kent is an international bestselling author of everything enemies to lovers romance.

Darkness is her playground, suspense is her best friend, and twists are her brain's food. However, she likes to think she's a romantic at heart in some way, so don't kill her hopes just yet.

Her heroes are anti-heroes and villains because she was always the weirdo who fell in love with the guys no one roots for. Her books are sprinkled with a touch of mystery, a healthy dose of angst, a pinch of violence, and lots of intense passion.

Rina spends her private days in a peaceful town in North Africa daydreaming about the next plot idea or laughing like an evil mastermind when those ideas come together.

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