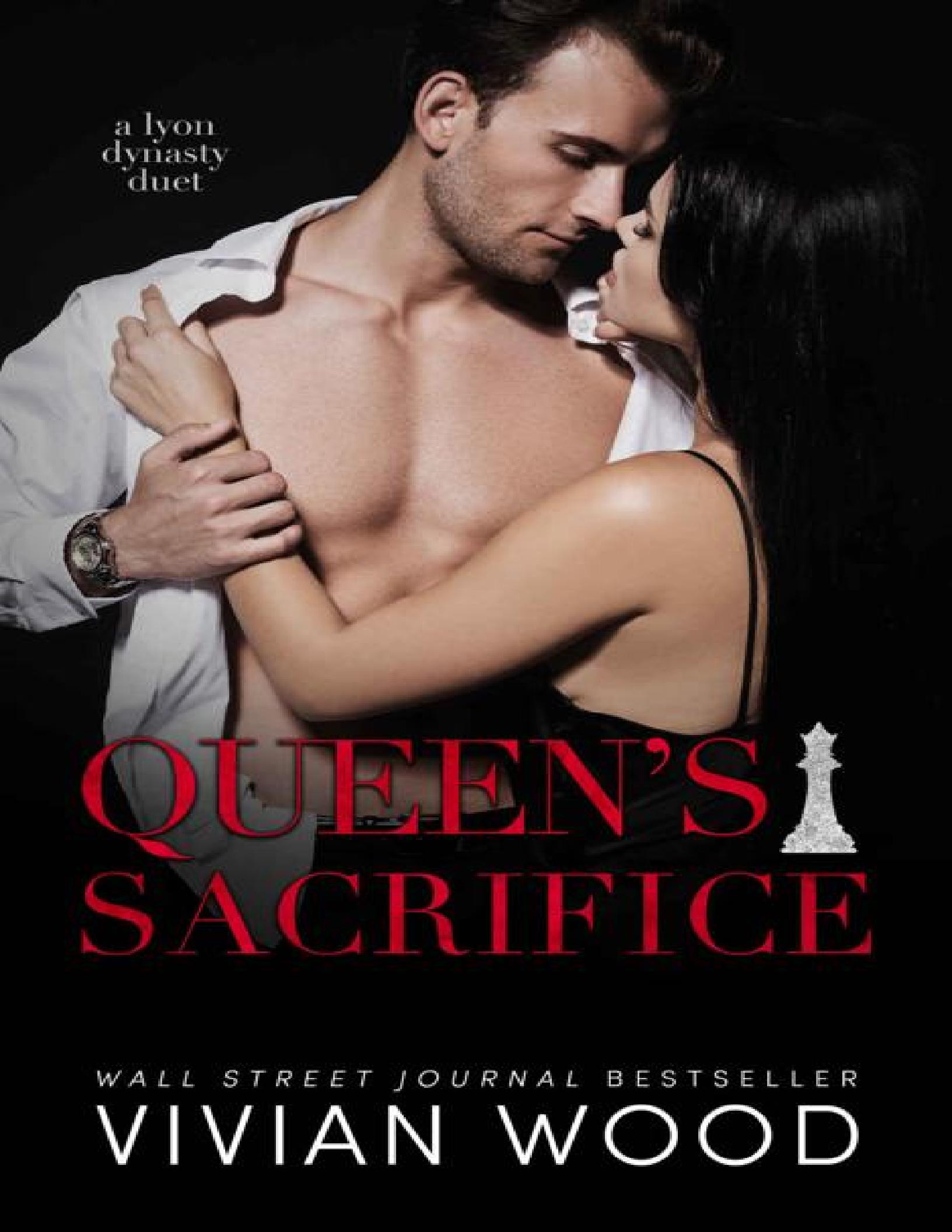


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dynasty
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QUEEN'S SACRIFICE



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QUEEN'S SACRIFICE

A DARK CAPTIVE ROMANCE

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CHAPTER ONE

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HADES

As light pours through the window of my hotel room, I groan and shade my eyes. For a moment, I can't place where I am. The soft, white sheets are luscious again my skin. But I've been so many places in the last five years, so many hotel rooms, so many beds exactly like this one. The only difference now is a distinct note of unease.

Something is not right.

There is an almost painful sensation of missing someone. I roll over and reach for the warm body that should be beside me. But like a phantom limb, there is nothing but an aching awareness of what used to be. Bile burns at the back of my throat and I sit up. Persephone.

Persephone is still missing.

For four months, I searched for her in every single place I could think of. Followed every trail, traced every place we'd ever been, questioned every bastard I could find about the location of Persephone or Constantine.

I even tried to contact her family, though I know that she wouldn't flee to them. The mealy-mouthing Etienne had little to say about her. And I had the damndest time finding anyone to take on the task of finding her.

My reputation precedes me, it seems. Whispers of my cruelty and brutality echo throughout the entirety of my dark realm.

I get up and pull on a fresh pair of dark boxer briefs, then stagger over to the window. Blinking into the bright sunlight coming through the large ceiling to floor patio doors, I shove my messy hair back from my forehead.

Fury begins to bubble in the center of my being. How can Penny still be missing after four months of my tearing the world apart? But I'm careful not to let any of my thoughts show on the outside.

After three months of torturing myself, I promised my brothers that I would quit my search. The Lyon family is back in business... and I am the mast head. Everything is normal, like it was before I ever met Persephone. Except, of course, that everything has shifted.

I feel lonely and haunted now, where before I was untouched by such emotions.

A loud thumping at my door draws my attention away from my morose thoughts. "Hades! Get ready!" Eros bellows. "Meet out here in twenty minutes."

Repressing a sigh, I drag myself into the shower. It's impossible for me to not think of Penny as I close my eyes and let the hot water rush over me. Her long raven locks, her hazel eyes. The sweetness of her mouth, the heat between her silky thighs.

The ache lodged in my chest sharpens. No amount of running my hand over the spot will do anything to dislodge or assuage it.

Shutting the lid tightly on my erratic emotions, I finish my shower and dress myself quickly. Black slacks, crisp black dress shirt, heavy black combat boots. I'm ready to go to war at any time and I feel no need to hide that fact from anyone that I do business with.

When I finally open the door to my bedroom, I find my two brothers already sprawled out in opposite chairs in the living room area of our shared suite. Ares swivels in his seat to look at me as I wander over to the coffee service that is set up on the table near the floor to ceiling windows.

"There ye are," Ares says with a grunt. "And here I was, thinking that I would have to come in there and get you. Figured I would catch ye moping about your missing girl again."

My mouth turns down at the corners. "Fuck off, Ares."

Ares gives a tiny smirk and sits back in his chair, folding his arms. His self-satisfied air says that he feels like he scored a point against me.

I grit my teeth, taking my coffee to the couch and sitting down.

Eros rolls his eyes at Ares. "Come on. It's too early to start being an asshole. We have more important things to discuss."

I purse my lips and take a sip of my coffee. "Who are we meeting again?"

Eros moves forward, leaning toward me. His expression is excited. "I finally found a buyer for the trucks that we left behind in Algiers. A

Hungarian separatist organization called Neph—" He pauses. "Neph-a-something."

"Nephadsereg," Ares corrects him. "Our contact is a guy named Lazlo Racz."

"Hm." I take another sip of my coffee and look out the window. My attention wanders, as it has for the last few months.

Eros starts telling me what exactly the Hungarians want in exchange for the trucks full of weapons and ammunition. But I'm not interested. Instead I focus on the view outside.

The light is harsh even though it's early. I squint out at the hazy view before me. Cairo is one of the most polluted cities I've ever seen and today is no exception. A thick blanket of smog lies across the tops of ancient brickwork buildings.

"Hades!" Ares snaps.

I shoot him a glare. "What?"

"Are you going to be like this forever?"

I set my coffee cup down on the end table and press my lips into a thin line.

"Like what?" I ask. I know what he's referring to, but I like provoking him and making him act out like the man-child he really is.

"She's gone," he growls. "She's gone and she's not coming back. When will you stop pining after her?"

I smile at him, purposefully showing him my teeth. "It's none of your fucking business."

"Ares, shut the fuck up." Eros tries to calm the waters between us. "Hades, you did promise us that you would stop looking for Persephone after she'd been gone for three months."

"No. If you heard that, you misunderstood." I lean forward in my chair, locking gazes with him. "I said that I would take up the reins of our company again. Nothing more, nothing less."

Ares rocks back in his chair, looking angry.

"I assumed that you would have gotten over your fixation with Persephone by now. If it's just having a girl, that can be arranged. With one phone call, I can have a girl that looks just like her in here, right now. And this one won't be so... damaged."

He makes a feeble fist with his right hand, echoing Penny's disability. The second he does that, I'm on my feet, raging, ready to kill him.

Eros manages to get between us, holding me back and trying desperately to keep the peace. “Hades, calm down.”

“Fuck you!” I yell at Ares, baring my teeth. I stick a finger in his face. “Don’t worry about her, Hades! Forget her, Hades! You sound like our father.”

Ares flushes. “Fuck you, Hades. Our mother was a drug addict and a whore. She left us when we were kids. And the fact that you say I’m like our father—”

“Your heart is every bit as black,” I spit.

“Will both of you shut the fuck up?” Eros says, exasperated. “I’m tired of having this argument with the two of you over and over again.”

We both go silent, glaring at each other. Eros pushes me back a step and checks his watch. “Jaysus. We’re already late. Lazlo is probably waiting downstairs at the bar.”

My rage doesn’t die down a single bit. But I’m not interested in continuing the conversation, so I just trudge toward the hotel suite’s door. It’s only a few minutes later that I step into the lavish

bar just off the hotel’s entrance. It’s a modern space, polished white granite everywhere with silky black accents. Eros waves to a man dressed in a white t-shirt, black pants, and a black baseball cap pulled over his eyes. The Hungarian, I presume, rises to his feet as we approach his wide, empty table. He drums his fingertips against his palms as he takes all three of us in.

“Eros,” he says, inclining his head ever so slightly as we reach him. His face contorts for just a moment and then it blanks again. “It is good to see you again, my friend.”

He speaks such a strongly accented English that it takes my mind a few moments to process his words. He is twitchy, his posture tense. I can’t tell if his shifty, constantly roving eyes are a sign of a drug problem, a personality trait, or something else entirely.

Eros bows, looking neat as a pin in his all-black attire. “Lazlo. Meet my brothers, Hades and Eros.”

Lazlo inclines his head again, his gaze sliding between the three of us. “You are named after the gods on Olympus?”

Aye.” Ares crosses his arms. “And what are you named after?”

Eros laughs, the sound forced. “You’ll have to excuse my brother. He is a bit bad tempered.” Eros gestures for Lazlo to sit. “If we can order a drink...”

Lazlo sits on one side of the table. Eros glances at me and I scan the room, making sure that there are no exits behind me before picking a seat. Ares and Eros quickly sit too, Eros looking around for a bar attendant.

“I took the liberty of paying the waiter to stay away for the next hour,” Lazlo says. He sits back, casting a glance around the room. “I would rather our business remain private.”

I cross my arms and give him a long, hard stare. “We’re selling three trucks that are currently hidden in a secure location in Algiers. Two trucks of... whole corn husks. One of individual kernels of corn. Do you understand?”

Lazlo scratches his chin, his face contorting again for just a moment. It must be a tic because he doesn’t mention it further.

“I understand.” He spreads his hands flat on the table. “I also understand that I’m not the first buyer.”

Ares stretches, pretending comfort. I can tell he’s ready to spring into action, though.

“The trucks can sit where they are parked for some time. So we’re not looking to offload some corn before it goes bad. If you’re looking for a bargain, I think you may need to shop around.”

He starts to push himself up from the table. I gesture for him to stay put. He stops, thinks it over for a moment, and then resettles himself. He gives me a hard look, but I clasp my hands on the table in front of me.

Tell us what you are offering in exchange for our trucks.” I pause for a second. “Do not waste our time, Lazlo.”

Lazlo drums his fingers on the table, licking his lips. “I have been dispensed half a million dollars for the transaction.”

“What the fuck?” Ares stands, glaring at Eros. “Ye said that he was worth listening to. What kind of paltry-ass shit is half a million?”

“There is more.” Eros adjusts his seat, uncomfortable. “Tell him what else, Lazlo.”

“Ah.” Lazlo smiles, flashing a couple of gold teeth. “I also have a piece of information that I think you’ll like.”

“Not interested. We have enough sources feeding us information.” I shoot an annoyed look at Eros and lumber to my feet. “Why the fuck did

you arrange this?"

"You should listen," Eros says, jerking his head toward Lazlo.

I look at the twitchy separatist, cocking my head. "Do you know where Constantine is?"

A puzzled look crosses his face. "Who?"

"This is a waste of my fucking time." I turn, pushing my chair out of the way as noisily as possible.

One single word stops me from barreling out of the bar.

"Persephone."

I hesitate, turning back on Lazlo with a glower. "What did you just say?"

He clears his throat, standing up.

"Word on the street is that you are looking for where someone might be holding a girl named Persephone. And I happen to possess an address that I think will please you."

It only takes me a moment to lurch over to him, grab him by the shirt, and put my face right in front of his. From this close, I can see Lazlo break out into a sweat.

"Where?" I demand to know.

"Easy," Lazlo says, prying his shirt from my grip. "We have some details to see to first."

"Hades don't believe this guy. He is definitely high as a kite, blowing smoke rings and hoping that you will be a fool enough to fall under his spell." Ares puts a hand on my shoulder, which I fling off.

"Don't," I warn him. I look at Lazlo. "If ye don't give up the address right now, it'll be your last decision, because I'll fucking gut ye."

I reach for my waistband, a distinct threat.

Lazlo gulps but doesn't back down. "Do we have a deal?"

"Hades, I'm telling you—"

"Fuck off." I focus all my attention on Lazlo. My heartbeat pounds like a drummer on cocaine. "Aye, ye asshole. We have a deal. Eros, go get the damn papers."

Ares throws his hands up, storming out of the bar. Eros follows him, leaving me alone with the Hungarian.

He takes a seat, his body language still strung as a notched arrow. He gestures to the seat next to his.

“Sit. Soon we will have signed the papers. You will give me the address of the trucks... and then I will give you the address of the girl. Yes?”

I grab the chair that he indicated, flipping it around. Honestly, I’m having trouble focusing on what he’s saying.

Persephone.

I can get Persephone back.

My heart thuds against my ribs, slamming itself with a kind of reckless abandon.

“You give me the address. Then I give you the address. We sort all the money out after we are both satisfied.”

Lazlo’s eyebrows rise in surprise. “Is this Persephone worth so much to you, then?”

I give him a sharklike smile. “You already know that I will skin you and eat your heart if you decide to fuck around with my money. So I feel sure that your little separatist friends will make good on that part. I just hope you realize that your information had better be good, because if not...”

I give a half-hearted shrug.

Lazlo swallows but a second later, he nods tightly. “It is correct.”

I clench my fists, excitement and anticipation tingling across my palms.

Soon...

Soon I’ll be able to touch Persephone once again.

Kiss her.

Fuck her.

Possess her.

I cannot wait.

CHAPTER TWO

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PERSEPHONE

The sun is setting in a dazzling array of colors. Reds, pinks, purples, even a dusky blue. I float on top of the water, always conscious of the rippling current below my body and the rushing shh shh of the ocean meeting the shore. The water is warm here, almost like a bath. On the distant shore, a woman stands and watches me, her hand thrown up to shield her eyes from the dying sun.

I don't want to think about Marta. Don't want to count the days that I have been held captive on this tropical paradise. Don't want to face the uncertain future.

So I submerge myself fully, darting into the water and swimming in a random direction until I have to come up for air. My left hand skims against my belly, swollen and growing rounder by the day.

Hades' final gift to me, it seems. He left me with his baby growing inside me... and several non-English speaking minders, to shelter in this endless summer.

I come up gasping for air, clearing the water from my eyes. Marta is approaching, her mouth set. From what I have gleaned, she doesn't like me swimming when I am so very pregnant. Five months along, if I have my timeline correct.

I have no real way of knowing, because I haven't seen a doctor since I arrived on this island, bound and gagged.

Sighing to myself, I start to swim toward the shore. Though I have come to love the sea and the salty air, I tire more easily these days. Besides, there is nowhere to swim to from this island.

Believe me, I tried that months ago.

My feet touch the sandy ocean floor and I trudge up the beach, leaving behind the warm water like I would leave a warm comforter in the winter. I'm shivering by the time I reach Marta, who holds an unfolded beach towel for me.

"Gracias," I say gently.

Marta nods, smoothing her hands down her long blue cotton dress. "Si. De nada."

She averts her gaze from my pregnant belly. It looks like I've managed to swallow a whole cantaloupe somehow and it is definitely noticeable to other people by now.

That, and the terrible bouts of morning sickness and tender breasts that I had early on. Thank god that's over.

I hurry into the white cotton dress that I left in the sand, pushing my feet into flip flops. Sand sticks to every part of my body but I don't much care.

I'm suddenly too tired to do much other than hustle toward the mansion that stands as the only deviled part of this whole freaking island. Again, I know that because I spent days searching for a way to get myself off of this island.

But there is none.

No hope.

A part of me worries about giving birth out here, with no one but terrified little Marta to help. But I can't think about that.

Marta looks around while we walk up to the beautiful white beachfront mansion.

"Pescado?" she whispers.

I nod, feeling like I can't possibly keep my eyes open for another minute. From experience, I can guess that the feeling will pass in about twenty minutes. "Is, pescado y arroz." Fish with rice. If I time it right, I can take a power nap before it's ready.

Marta seems like she's about to say more. Then she shakes her head and waves me inside the front door.

Bone tired, I head inside the mansion. The very first time I came in this entryway, I was awestruck by the sleek, white marble everywhere and the obvious opulence of the chandelier and large tropical floral arrangement on a side table. Today I'm used to the opulence of having every single place your eye lands on be made of stark white marble. I climb the grand stairway, which is really the centerpiece of this part of the house. I'm only

vaguely aware of the trail of wet sand I leave in my wake. All I know is that all traces will be removed in the time I am in my room. By the time I come back down, it will be swept and mopped, shining as if new.

I head up to the master bedroom, kicking off my flip flops and pulling my beach cover up over my head. This room is as white and luxurious as any downstairs, with a large white canopy bed, a small sitting area, and a balcony that overlooks the wildness behind the mansion.

I discard the silky cover up on the lush white carpet as I barrel toward my bed. Piling onto the bed headfirst, I close my eyes and sigh in a moment of sheer bliss. I let my body rest there for a few minutes before I push myself up to a sitting position again. It's the easiest thing in the world for me to just wake up every day, go exhaust myself amongst the waves, and crash when I come back to the house. If I weren't being held captive... if I wasn't pregnant... if I wasn't anxious about eventually having to give birth alone...

I could live like this without a single complaint.

However, that is not my situation. My reality calls for action rather than the lazy numbness that I've settled into. I creep to the window of my room, moving aside the curtain and peering out.

A man stands guard there with a big, shiny automatic weapon hung loosely over his shoulder. His bald head is facing away from me so I can observe him unseen for a minute.

Aside from this man and Marta, there are three other men who live here and watch over me.

I purse my lips and watch for several minutes. Though I don't have a watch, I am pretty sure that the guard is about to change. For the past week, I've kept close track of the movements of the people assigned to keep me here.

Another minute passes. I lick my lips, growing anxious. Maybe they have changed their routines.

Maybe the guards are onto me somehow.

But as soon as I think that, another man emerges from the house and greets the bald guard. I drop the curtain, peering at them through a crack as they exchange a few words. Then the bald man heads off into the trees behind the house, disappearing.

I step back, sucking in a deep breath. I need to know where he is going. When the guards finish their shifts, they always head in the same direction.

My thoughts are interrupted by Marta knocking softly at my bedroom door and calling my name.

“Señora?”

I turn around, a little surprised. “Yes?”

She pushes the door open with her elbow, then comes in the room bearing a tray. It holds my dinner and a glass of water.

I arch a brow at her as she sets it down in the sitting area. Marta puts a finger to her lips and crosses the room, closing the door. Then she comes close, whispering. “No coma.”

She points to the tray, then slides her hands around her neck, miming being choked. “Comprende?”

I keep my voice down, mirroring her hushed whisper. “It’s poisoned?”

“Esta...” She searches for a word. “Drogada. Is drug.”

“The food is drugged?”

Marta clasps my hands, nodding emphatically. “Is, si. Podia see malo para la bebe.”

She presses her hand against my stomach, searching my face to make sure I understand. I don’t know a word of Spanish, but I understand that she is warning me off eating or drinking what she has prepared.

Why she brought it up here, I have no idea.

“Si. I understand. Gracias, Marta.”

Her eyebrows knit. “El jefe? Boss? He... come.”

My eyes widen. My pulse picks up, my heart hammering hard against my chest. “Now?”

“Señor Lyon viene esta noche.” She holds out her wrist, pointing to the number nine. It’s only half an hour from now.

My mouth opens but not a single word escapes my lips. All I can think about is that I will see Hades within the hour.

And in turn, he will finally see my pronounced baby bump. My hands flutter up to lie protectively on my belly.

If he knows that I am pregnant, why would he drug my food? He can’t know.

Or maybe he knows but doesn’t care. That bit of news would be the hardest for me to swallow. Still, it’s worth considering the possibility.

Marta squeezes my hand, drawing me from my thoughts. “Penny. Ester bien.”

I nod. “Muchas gracias, Marta.”

Then she turns toward the door, slipping out without another word.

I sprint through a shower and then put on a knee length black knit dress. There is no use in hiding my baby bump, so I guess I will just go the other way with it. But the entire time I am getting myself dressed and presentable, I can't stop myself from trembling.

What will Hades have to say about my pregnancy? After all this time he had held me captive, I can't quite imagine what his response will be. Nor can I form any train of logic on his end that ended with me on this island prison.

I'm all nerves when I head downstairs. Does Hades know about my state? Why am I being kept here?

Those two questions and variations thereof play in my head on repeat as I take a seat next the windows in the massive white living room.

When I first see movement out of the leftmost corner of my eye, my heart rate speeds up so much that I start sweating. Three figures materialize in the pale moonlight, the central figure dark and lean. My whole body tingles at the sight of him.

His head is down as he approaches, but all the details are right. He's dressed impeccably in a dark shirt and black slacks. His hair is the right color, glinting black against the. although he's had it cut so that it's now clipped close to his scalp rather than chin length. He approaches the mansion so swiftly that my heart squeezes.

Could it be that Hades wants to see me too?

My mind whirls, going down a rabbit hole of my own devising. If he's excited to see me, maybe there was a good reason why I've been held here for so long. But why would he not just tell me?

Why leave me here to languish without so much as an explanation?

In the next moment, he raises his head, glowering at the house. And I have my answer.

Because the man approaching is not Hades, but his brother Ares.

My jaw drops. What in the world?

Ares storms in the house. I hear him bellowing in the entryway. "Where is Persephone?"

I get up off of the couch, swallowing, and raise my chin defiantly. He enters the room I am in, glaring at me as he approaches.

His footsteps falter when he takes in my entire shape. His eyebrows rise and he slows to a stop twenty feet from me.

“You’re...” He starts, then stops, scowling. Ares lifts his eyes to mine, sneery slightly. “Jaysus, Persephone.”

I cross my arms, trying to determine whether or not Hades actually knows that I’m here or not. Tilting my head, I make an effort to appear calm.

Inside though, I’m a seething mess.

“And where is the father of my baby?” I ask coolly.

Ares paces around me, looking me up and down. “How should I know?”

I cut my eyes at him and put a hand to my belly. “You don’t know where your own damn brother is?”

“Don’t worry about Hades.” He gives me a funny look. “I’m here to resolve things amicably. Sit down.”

“I don’t obey commands,” I spit at him. “If you want that, consider getting a dog.”

He grimaces, turning around. “Treme el malting.”

Instantly one of my watchers steps forward, holding a briefcase out. Ares jerks his head towards me.

“Muéstrale el contenido.”

My guard opens the briefcase, showing me a not-inconsiderable amount of cash. My first instinct is to yell at Ares... but I bite my tongue.

Instead, I look at the briefcase, unimpressed. “What am I supposed to do with that?”

He grimaces. “Disappear. That’s all I want. You take the money, sign a goodbye letter, and vanish into the sunset.”

I slide my hand down my stomach, sizing him up.

“What letter?” I ask, arching a brow.

“A goodbye letter, telling my brother that you left, and you don’t want to be found.”

My brows rise. “So Hades doesn’t know I’m here?”

Ares bares his teeth, coming closer and closer until he can grab my arm. “Will you do it or not?”

“I think you and I both know that ship has sailed.”

He gives me a hard shake. “Pregnant women disappear all the time, lassie. They just up and vanish, never to be seen or heard from again. Do

you want to join the dead ones? Or will you be fucking reasonable, sign the goddamned letter, and take off into the sunset of your own volition?”

He grips my arm hard enough that I cry out.

“Okay! Stop!”

He releases me, looking completely disgusted. “I have the letter all ready to go. Follow me.”

I swallow hard as he disappears and trail after him, my arms still throbbing from his handprint.

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CHAPTER THREE

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HADES

“Are you sure that the trucks are still in the warehouse?” I ask in careful Arabic. Glancing out the window of my hotel room, I slide a finger between the skin of my neck and my silky black button up shirt.

My heart pounds. It’s been twenty four hours since Lazlo dropped a bomb on me, telling me he will trade Penny’s location as part of this arms deal.

Since then, I’ve been suffocating, needing to jump into action the second I get the news.

On the other end of the phone, Mohamad pauses. His moment of hesitation stretches into half a minute. “I am at the location. Let me just check again.”

Mohamad sounds worried, though I’m fairly sure that he’s more worried about my reaction than whether or not the goods are there. It’s his job to protect my cargo and if anything happened to the weapons in the trucks, his ass is on the line.

I crack my knuckles. Lazlo needed time to scrape the paltry half a million euros together. Checking my watch, I reassure myself.

Only half an hour until I lay eyes on Lazlo. Until I can finally have actionable intel that I’ll pounce on immediately.

“Text me confirmation,” I say. “If everything goes according to plan, your work will be finished this afternoon.”

“Yes, boss.”

He hangs up and I purse my lips, putting the phone in my pocket.

Eros pokes his head through my open bedroom door. “Do you have confirmation that the trucks are still at the warehouse.”

“Mohamad is executing the final checks.”

“Good. The trucks have been under surveillance this whole time. But it can’t hurt for Mohamad to inspect them a final time.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Scooping up my suit jacket, I put it on as I head toward the door. Eros steps back to let me pass by.

“Let me get my jacket and then we can go.”

I stop in my tracks, looking around. “Where is Ares?”

“He said something about a personal emergency and that he would be back in a few days.”

Giving Eros a skeptical glance, I check that my gun is still holstered under my jacket.

“Do you believe him?”

Eros snorts. “That he had a personal matter come up?” He shrugs. “Sure. But I also think he was careful to make his excuse as broad as possible.”

“Hmm.” I check my watch. It is impossible to worry about such mundane details when Penny’s location will be revealed to me in short order. “I’ve got the meetup location. It’s in a busy area, close to the French embassy.”

“Here.” He tosses me a black baseball cap and pulls on a similar dark grey one. He jerks his head to the door. “Shall we?”

We head out, my heart rate speeding up the second we exit the elevator doors in the grand marble hotel lobby. I don my hat and add sunglasses, pulling the brim down for an extra bit of security.

The last thing I want is for someone to recognize me and make my life harder by holding me up somehow. Not when the tantalizing answer to a months-long question is so damned close to being within my grasp.

I step out into the chaos of a busy Egyptian street. Horns blare from older model cars, their drivers impatient yet strangely content with their lack of movement. People on foot weave between the cars, heading in all directions. And everywhere I look, there are billowing clouds of dust, forced down by the heavier smog that lies like a thick carpet over the city.

Following Eros closely, I hurry down the street. Getting to the plaza itself is no problem. In a couple of minutes, we turn into a crowded street market, packed with vendors at their booths, haggling with patrons of all ages.

Eros pulls me to a stop, squinting around. “Now we just have to find the fucker.”

I nod, my muscles tense, my posture ready for action. My eyes scan the crowd, skipping over old women wearing niqabs and a group of rattily dressed kids playing football in the street.

In the end, Lazlo finds us. A young woman dressed very modestly in a long lilac dress with a white headscarf. She wanders a little too close for my personal comfort and I glare at her.

A second later, I realize with a start that she is actually Lazlo. The Hungarian raises his rather hairy hand and puts a finger to his lips. Then he gestures for us to follow him.

I notice that Lazlo doesn’t carry any kind of briefcase. A cash transaction is not necessary in this day and age, but the obvious lack of cash pushes me a step closer to the edge. I grit my teeth, casting my eyes over the scene around me.

Trying to sense whether I am walking into some sort of trap.

Lazlo hurries across the plaza and ducks in close to the dreary buildings that line the street. Pulling Eros along, I follow Lazlo to one of the nearby doorways that frame the market. When he ducks inside, I unbutton my jacket and move my hand toward my weapon.

Just ahead of me, I can see Eros doing the exact same thing. We are well-trained; our chances of surviving any bullshit that Lazlo might pull on us now is high.

But he doesn’t seem to have anything like that in mind. After he steps through the doorway, we step into an alley with no roof and empty other than us.

Lazlo points at the door and I close it after I slip through. Only then does the Hungarian separatist push back his headscarf with a groan.

“It is too fucking hot for this disguise,” he laments. “Sorry to have to keep such a low profile. But even here, there are people that are on the lookout for me. Better to be safe, eh?”

Whipping off my sunglasses, I nod. I pull out my phone and check my text messages.

The cargo is safe, my screen reads.

Penny is so close; I think I can almost taste her sweet tang in the back of my mouth. My pulse hammers against my neck.

When I speak though, I make sure to keep my tone even and hide the excitement that floods my veins.

“I would like to move things along. Give me the coordinates where they are keeping the girl first. Then I give you the address of the warehouse in Algiers where you can find the trucks.”

Lazlo runs his hand over his bald head, cocking a brow. “You want the girl’s location first?”

I narrow my eyes and start to move closer, glowering. But just that fast, he puts his hands up.

“I did not mean to intrude.”

“Keep talking, Lazlo. If I don’t hear the location from your lips soon, I’m going to start thinking that you decided not to turn your back on Constantine.”

Lazlo squints, looking a little puzzled. “How do you know who the other bidder was?”

My brows go up just a hair. I slide a curious look at Eros. He gives his head a tiny shake, meaning that he doesn’t know what Lazlo is talking about.

“Constantine offered to pay you for the address?”

“Yes...” Lazlo frowns, looking between me and Eros. “He offered me two million euros. It just so happened that you have what I need most.” He smiles, his eyes hardened. “Although I don’t understand why you didn’t just beat the coordinates out of your brother. If Ares was my blood, I would hang him upside down from a tree and drain his blood until he confessed where he had hidden the girl. Perhaps that is just the Hungarian way though...”

I blink several times, unsure what he said to me just now. “I think I misheard you. Who has the girl?”

Lazlo’s eyes narrow on me. “Your brother Ares. Is this new information to you?”

Without realizing it, I violently lurch toward the wall, punching the dull sandstone with enough force to cause a crack in the wall.

Lazlo jumps back a foot, licking his lips nervously and throwing his hands up like a shield. “I did not know. I assure you; I would have made a bigger commotion yesterday.”

My furious gaze turns to Eros. His cheeks color slightly but he is already shaking his head, a denial on his lips.

"I don't know a thing about it, Hades. I swear. This is the first I'm hearing of it."

My eyes burn into him. "I'll deal with you later," I grate out. "For now, I want to know where the girl is stashed."

Lazlo nods eagerly. "Here, let me get the coordinates for you now." Reaching in a pocket sewn into his dress, he pulls out his phone and scrolls for a moment.

Then he types something in and presses a button, prompting it to make a soft chime. Almost instantly, my phone buzzes in my pocket. Without taking my eyes off of Lazlo, I take my phone out.

"It's all there," he says, inclining his head.

I check the address, my brows lifting with surprise when I realize it is on Menorca, an island close to Ibiza. My heart thuds as I quickly send forward his text to my private investigator in France. As my local agent in Europe, he can have teams scrambled and heading to her location in under an hour.

My heart is beating so damn fast in my chest that for a moment, I am unsteady on my feet. Eros moves in smoothly, taking over. He pulls out his phone, gets Mohamad's phone number, and then sends him the address of the warehouse. I lean against the dirty sandstone wall and watch their interaction, but I hear little of it. If money is exchanged, I miss it somehow. My mind is whirling, exploring the possibilities.

Could my brother really be behind Persephone's kidnapping? I'm dumbfounded. He watched me as I fell apart for months and months, and yet... he remained silent.

Part of me says it is not possible. But a larger part of me says that of course it is... who else would stage a kidnapping and not bother to ask for a hefty ransom?

Faintly, I hear Eros questioning Lazlo. "Does Constantine know that you are selling to Hades?"

I blink. My hand aches, although I do not think it is broken. I cup it with my undamaged fingers and stare off into the distance.

The only thing that brings me back into sharp focus is the sound of the first gunshot. From somewhere up above, a sleek bullet glides right through the back of Lazlo's skull.

For a moment, I'm confused. Lazlo stopped speaking mid-sentence and I look at him, my mind working to catch up with the sound. A small stain

appears on the front of his dress just below the right breastbone.

Time seems to thin, stretching out for a few moments. Lazlo starts to look up... and then suddenly sags to the ground, his life cut suddenly, irredeemably short. It's only then that Eros snaps into action.

"Gun!"

He pulls me against the wall. I backpedal into the shadows of the doorway, drawing my weapon. I cringe as my hand throbs sharply, but my body does what I want it to. I swing the weapon up, covering the opening over our heads.

Eros draws his weapon too, backing up until both of us are resting against the door. But there is no sign of life. No movement from above whatsoever.

In fact, were it not for Lazlo's crumpled body lying in the alley, blood soaking the cobblestones underfoot, I would doubt that a shot was fired.

Eros opens the door behind him, peering out. "Let's go."

My heart is in my throat as I follow him out onto the busy street. The ebb and flow of the marketplace continues as if Lazlo were not bleeding the last gushes of his life's blood onto its streets. I ease the door closed behind me and follow my brother as he ducks down and moves along the line of buildings.

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CHAPTER FOUR

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PERSEPHONE

Crossing the open ocean in a speedboat is a totally new and wild experience for me. The boat's motor roars, zipping us along through the water. For a minute, the whole world seems to be made of nothing bright the too-bright sky against the rugged, deep blue of the water beneath us. The vista is breathtaking in its scope and size.

Unfortunately, I am not exactly in the most comfortable position to admire the view. My wrists and ankles are bound to a sleek metal bar running along the white leather seating that clings to the ship's hull. I'm facing out at least, away from Ares and his posh model that he's been making out with on the entire boat ride thus far.

She giggles, no doubt playing with her long, perfectly straight blonde hair. "Oh, Ares..."

I grit my teeth and try to tamp down the new wave of nausea that threatens to overtake me. Not because Ares and his pretty new toy make me sick, which they do. They haven't been exactly shy about touching each other in front of me. From the sounds I heard, the blonde may have actually orgasmed already.

But sadly, that's not what makes me wretch. It's actually because I am watching the foamy white caps come to a peak and then disappear on the dark blue ocean. Normally, it would be okay. Interesting to watch, even.

But some combination of being tied up, seeing things from a sideways view, and being quite pregnant is making me seriously seasick. I close my eyes tightly, praying that we will soon slow down. That my nausea will crest and then ebb, vanishing like it never existed.

It doesn't. I taste the bile in the back of my throat a few seconds before I turn my head down to the leather banquette seat and wretch again. This time, a small amount of liquid comes up, spewing messily from my mouth all over the white leather.

The powerboat slows and I hear Ares mutter something I can't quite hear.

"Ares!" the model whines. "Why are we stopping?"

I sense him when he lurches over to me, untying my wrists from the bar. My hands tingle as I wipe at my mouth, favoring Ares with a glare.

"Jaysus," he says, taking his sunglasses off. "You are a fucking mess."

He reaches down and grabs me roughly by the upper arm. He yanks me to a sitting position. I respond by doing what feels right...

I lean forward and vomit again, making sure to get some on his knees.

"Fuck!" he screams. He looks down at his black pants, astounded. "Ye've got to be joking. First ye won't sign yer name to the bloody letter. And now this?"

I glare up at him, trying to convey the sheer hate that I have for him through my expression. Wiping at my mouth again, I snarl. "You could have just let me go."

"And let you disappear with my brother's baby inside of ye?" His lip curls. "I think not. Don't worry, little Persephone. I've figured out a grand plan for you."

My eyes narrow to slits. But inside, I feel an icy shot of fear enter my bloodstream.

"I can't imagine what a delight that will be."

Ares smirks, retying my hands to the deck railing. "Aye. I canna wait to introduce ye to my friend Angus. Ye will be at his beck and call... and at his mercy. He lives in the remotest part of Greenland so..."

He waves a hand in my face, backing up. "Bye bye, Penny. Ye won't die on my watch. But ye might wish ye had."

I look away over the shining ocean, not wanting him to see that his words struck a chord with me. I'm afraid, both for myself and for my unborn child. I can't just let Ares lead me away to some unknown fate.

But how am I going to escape? As the sun beats down on me, I bow my head and think about my options.

Ares moves back to stand behind the steering wheel and ignores me. He kicks the engine back into overdrive and the speedboat begins to move

again.

I cast a sideways glance over at Ares. He's a big guy, broad-shouldered, built like the trunk of a tree. He might even win out in a size competition with Hades.

Overpowering him is not in the cards. So that means I'll have to escape. Maybe when we are getting off of the boat, I'll seize the opportunity.

In the distance, I can just make out a dark mass and several bright white spots. As the boat's engines roar, the dots gradually become solidified into individual large yachts.

"Oooh, I just can't wait to get to the coast of Spain!" the blonde breathes.

Casting my gaze over her, I absorb that piece of information. We're on the coast of Spain. It changes nothing about my plan for escape, but it does inform my next steps after that.

"It'll just be the two of us soon," Ares murmurs. "We can go to the beach... and you can wear absolutely nothing."

The model giggles, shooting me a searing gaze. Why she has apparently decided that I'm her enemy, I exactly don't know.

We close in on the shore. Now I can make out the Valencia orange trees dotting the shore and even a person strolling down the shore with an armful of boxes.

As we approach a long dock, I notice a familiar looking large white sailing vessel docked nearby. My heartbeat picks up. It's the same ferry boat that I took months ago with Hades at my side.

Sure enough, Ares slides the speedboat into a slip very near the ferry. My heart is in my throat; I'm at an advantage here because I have seen the surrounding docks and ferry terminal area.

I close my eyes and yawn, feigning tiredness. Ares sees my little show and smirks as he strides over to untie my hands and ankles.

"Now we're all nice and docile, just like I prefer my women. Maybe if ye weren't pregnant with my brother's seed, I'd keep ye for a few weeks."

He slides his hand onto my thigh and wiggles his eyebrows, teasing me. I turn my head away to show my repulsion, tasting bile again.

He grins as he fastens cuffs to my wrists. "I'll take that as a no."

I don't respond. Instead I press my lips into a firm line and continue looking away toward the horizon. My right hand tingles like crazy, throbbing to indicate that I will be achy from confinement later. I stretch my

hand as best as I can, aware that I need to be ready to launch into action at any moment.

Ares helps the blonde out of the boat. I tense, knowing I'm next. He turns and lumbers over to me, jerking me to my feet. I play at docility, pretending to be cowed as he leads me to the dock.

Ares eyes me. "My plan will be the best for everyone involved. You'll see. You might not warm up to Angus right away. But eventually, you'll settle in. Besides, can you imagine having a child with a man as hated and hunted as Hades?"

Blood suffuses my cheeks, but I simply don't answer. His question stays with me, though. Because I can imagine a life of fleeing from one place to the next, a target on my back.

That's no way to raise a child.

Ares steps up on to the dock first and then reaches down, grabbing at my tied hands. I let out a squeal of surprise and pain as my right arm refuses to move upward easily. My shoulder has been frozen since my accident and I haven't been able to lift my right arm past shoulder height since.

Ares doesn't stop. He just continues to lift me until my whole body is on the dock, stiffened with the searing pain he's just unleashed on my poor body. My eyes tear up and I cry out.

Ares drops me on my feet with absolutely no ceremony. "Shut up."

He turns, looking down the dock toward the ferry terminal. The pretty blonde model is halfway skipping up toward where people spill out of the ferry's private walkway, shooting him occasional pouty glances over her shoulder. Ares stands still for a moment, wobbling a little as he stands near the edge of the dock.

All around us, there is dark water, swirling and lapping. I don't even put that much thought in my actions. Lunging forward, I give Ares a hard shove. He flails for a second before tipping off the dock, heading for the water with a big splash.

I take off down the dock, running for my life. In my head, I am thinking about finding a policeman or a security guard, anyone who will take one look at me and realize I'm in trouble.

But when I get up to the ferry terminal, there is no one even who even vaguely resembles an authority figure. There are a cluster of young girls taking selfies near the ferry. And over by the gift shop, an older couple compare greeting cards.

Everyone else has left the terminal and headed out into the city just beyond the doors.

I run through the terminal, headed for the exit. Glancing behind me, I am astounded to see recently-drenched Ares pounding up the dock and entering the terminal.

Shit! I sprint out the doors, bursting out onto the street. It's not terribly crowded right now, just the usual very groups of tourists putting their bags into cabs. I make a beeline for one taxi in particular that waits patiently, its doors open while the driver and passenger load the luggage in the trunk. I get in, slamming the door, massively out of breath.

Looking back, I see Ares burst out of the doors, looking around wildly for where I have gone. I duck down but he spots me easily, storming toward me.

My heart hammers against the wall of my chest. I look around desperately for anything that will hold him off, even for a little while until the guards can be called.

My eyes fall on the front passenger seat, where the driver has been cutting out articles from the local newspaper. And right beside it are the sharp-looking scissors.

I reach forward and grab them, arming myself. Ares flings open the door and I drive them down over my head, slicing at his arms.

He makes a startled sound, drawing back and looking at me like I'm somehow the crazy one. "Are ye serious, Persephone?"

"Stay back!" I shout, wielding the scissors again. "I'm serious, Ares!"

He just reaches in again, grabbing my ankle and pulling me slowly toward the door. I lash out, cutting him several times with the scissors. But he isn't deterred at all.

A desperate thought flashes through my mind. It won't be the first time I'll be forced to lie through my teeth, but it will be the toughest to pull off.

I turn the scissors toward my belly, calling out again. "Get back! Otherwise I will hurt myself! Your brother's child is right here. What do you think Hades will say when he's found out that you let me kill myself and his heir all the same time?"

Ares goes still, looking at me like I've gone insane. "Ye wouldn't dare!"

Tossing my head, I brandish the scissors again. I laugh a little, though I'm so fucking scared inside.

“Try me, Ares. I’d rather die than let you make life decisions that will affect not only me, but my child and Hades.”

He sneers at me. “Ye are the queen of the damned. Ye know that, right?”

I lift my chin, pressing the scissors against my belly. And Ares stares me down, unable to predict my next move.

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CHAPTER FIVE

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HADES

As soon as I approach the ferry terminal, I see a familiar face. Ares is leaning over the opened back door of a taxi, his expression furious. He reels back, shouting at someone that I can't see from the angle I'm approaching.

My heart seizes in my chest. I know exactly who he's yelling at.

Persephone.

"Ares!" I bark.

He stiffens, looking over at me. For a split second, his expression is one of pure, unadulterated panic. Like the naughty house cat that has been caught playing with the sneaky little mouse.

Then Ares catches himself and his expression turns stony, showing nothing but a faint trace of annoyance. He crosses his arms and takes a step back, his posture already trying to defend the indefensible.

"Hades..." He licks his lips. "I was about to call you. I found Persephone—"

I cut him off mid-sentence, shoving him out of the way. Penny sits up in the car, staring at me like I've just shocked her by growing two brand new heads.

Raven hair, satin skin, luscious lips...

She's right here within my reach. And all god damned mine.

Her lips part. "Hades!"

She says my name like a prayer, like I am somehow sacred to her. I can't breathe, my eyes traveling over every inch of her face.

I think until this moment I wasn't letting myself hope to ever see her again.

"Lass," I murmur. I hold out a hand to her, beckoning,

Penny scoots out of the back of the taxi, fleeing from Ares. I barely have time to notice that something is off about her body's shape. She barrels right into my arms, distracting me. I give a soft woof as she hugs me so fiercely that I exhale the breath in my lungs.

"You found me," she says, her voice quivering. She buries her head against my neck, her hot tears falling onto my skin.

"Aye..." I say.

I inhale her delicate scent, my hands tightening as I grip her. I missed her so damn much that it's almost too much to admit my feelings out loud. I choose my words carefully, mindful that my brother is only a few feet away.

"Fuck, Persephone. I thought you were lost to me forever."

She is fully weeping as she pulls me against her body and hugs me harder. "Almost."

I feel her stomach between our bodies, pushing tightly against me. Pushing her back a half step, I rake my gaze over her body from head to toe.

When I realize that my sweet little Penny is heavy with child, my mouth opens. I blink.

Could that...

Could it be mine?

The idea that it might be honestly shocks me more than anything else.

"Fucking hell." My gaze is riveted on her black clad stomach. "Is that... what is that?"

Persephone's hands fly to her mouth. Her tears roll down her face and she takes a quick, deep inhale. Before she can say anything, Ares cuts in.

"She claims that it's yours," he grates out. "She also just threatened to kill the babe a few minutes ago."

My heart starts racing. I swing my gaze to her, still reeling.

Penny's eyes widen. "That isn't what I said at all!"

"Yer a liar." He clears his throat, giving me a hard gaze. "Ye've known me my entire life, Hades. I'm telling you the truth."

Penny practically roars her disagreement.

"You kidnapped me and held me hostage! You were about to give me to some strange man who would make sure that I never bothered you again! I was trying to keep you at bay until the cops came!"

I look between Ares and Persephone, my lip curling. “And just who am I supposed to believe?”

Penny ducks her head, flushing. Ares is quick to say, “ye’d best believe me. I am yer brother, for better or for worse.”

“And ye just... what? Happened to find Penny right here, where Lazlo suggested that I start looking for her?”

He looks me in the eye and doesn’t even flinch. “Aye. I heard a whisper from a source. I came to find out if there was any truth to it before I got yer hopes up. And it’s a good thing too, because she’s trying to run from us.”

“Trying to run from you!” Penny says, pointing an accusatory finger at Ares. “You have been quite clear in your belief that if I was made to vanish, you and your brothers’ lives would return to normal.”

Ares bares his teeth and moves toward her, clearly threatening her. “Stupid bitch.”

Instinctively, I move between them, sheltering Penny with my brawn. Ares stops, his gaze flicking to me.

“Ye can’t trust her,” he says, his voice gone to gravel. “She’s a woman, just like all the rest. She lies and tries to play us against each other. She’s damaged goods and she knows it, so she’s going to cling to ye and use yer strength in place of her own.”

Persephone gasps softly. My eyes narrow on Ares.

“That’s enough out of ye,” I rasp. “I’m going to talk to the lass and judge her tale on its own merits.”

“Yer letting her make a fool of ye.” Ares turns his head and spits on the ground. “Da would be a-rollin’ over in his grave if he heard ye talking like that against yer brother.” He thumps his chest. “I’m yer blood.”

“Yer a snake in the grass at the best of times.” I tense, feeling that at any moment, he might have the nerve to land the first blow.

First of many... and I’m fairly sure that if we start to fight, it won’t end until one of us is near death.

Penny clasps my hand, tugging me backward.

“Hades...” she whispers. She sounds afraid.

I am on a precipice, poised between two lives. In my bones, I can feel the momentousness of this moment in time. On one hand, Ares stands, reminding me of the nomadic life I lived with my brothers and how much wealth and success stands to be gained.

One the other is delicate young Persephone, her swollen stomach a sign of the future she now offers me. I suck in a breath, already knowing just who I'm ready to go to war to protect.

Ares catches my expression and his lip curls derisively. Before I can say another word, Ares steps back, giving me a flinty look. "Run along with your bitch, then."

My shoulders twitch as I stare him down. He seems haughty, which in my current mood is the nail in the coffin for me. It's time to tell him who is the boss. I lean closer, a wicked intent in my eyes.

"You don't tell me what to do, little brother."

Penny wraps her body around my arm, trying to pull me back again. "Hades..."

Ares sneers at me, shaking his head.

"Look at ye. Ye've just found her and yet she has ye jumping around at her commands, like yer nothing but her well trained lap dog. It's like Ma and Da, ye know. Just like history repeating itself."

I growl at him, feeling the need to fight building in my chest and rippling through my veins.

His face contorts with disgust and he turns on one heel, storming away. His words cut into me, lashing me to the bone.

"What, yer going to leave me here like this?" I grate out.

Ares doesn't slow down. I stare after his retreating figure, my hands clenching and unclenching.

Penny pulls me back into the real world by pulling on my hand again. "Hades?"

My heart lurches. I glance down at her for a just a second. My heart starts pounding when I'm faced with a bigger, more messy problem.

Even if the child is mine...

What the fuck am I supposed to do with a fragile new life in this messed up world?

I can't help myself. Reverting to my old ways, I take my feelings out on Penny.

"Be quiet," I growl. "I have to figure out what to do with ye."

Her eyes widen. "What do you mean by that?"

I give myself a shake and then fish my phone from my pocket, ordering a ride to the nearest hotel. All the while, I keep glancing at her stomach out of the corner of my eye. It's just unbelievable that she should be in such a

state. In all the time I spent imagining this reunion, I never for a second thought that Penny would be pregnant.

The question is, is it even my child?

If it is mine, I'll deal with it.

But if not... I will have to deal with her, somehow.

My chest tightens with the thought of all the myriad possibilities.

"Can you say something?" Penny asks, frustrated.

I snap my head to the side and scowl down at Penny. Shaking loose of her grasp, I glower at her.

"What am I supposed to do with ye?" I ask her, my tone sharp. "Hmm? I'd love to know how the fuck you disappeared for four months and now you show up..." I wave at her belly, making my disgust apparent. "And yer obviously pregnant. It's like ye are a cat that sneaked out of the house and came back just to give birth."

Penny swallows, a protective hand going to her belly. "It's your child, Hades."

Letting out a snort of disbelief, I shake my head. "We'll see what a doctor has to say about that."

To my surprise, she nods eagerly. "I need to see an obstetrician right away. I have been held hostage on an island for months and haven't been to a doctor at all." She bites her lip, her expression concerned. When she opens her mouth to continue, though, I raise a hand to stop her.

"No more talking," I snap. "I have to figure out where I'm taking ye."

Penny's expression looks pinched, but she just lifts her chin, angry and defiant. I want to grips her hips, pull her again my body, and greedily taste her plump pink lips.

But I just corral her toward the waiting SUV. I need to know what happened, but first we have to get out of the street and into the relative safety of a hotel suite.

As if summoned, a black SUV pulls up only a few feet away. I walk over, yanking open the back door. Then I step aside, motioning for Penny to get in.

She looks at me, swallowing. There is a note of indecision in her eyes. Then she bows her head and walks past me, climbing in the back seat.

CHAPTER SIX

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PERSEPHONE

As soon as Hades gets me inside of our luxurious penthouse suite, he shuts the door and directs a glare my way. “Sit down.”

I give him my most regal, steeliest glance. “With pleasure.”

All the way up here, I couldn’t wait to touch Hades. To embrace him, to press my lips against his, to be held by him. All the things I’ve dreamt of these last few months when I cried myself to sleep.

But now, Hades paces back and forth, his arms folded and one hand covering his mouth. He keeps looking at me as if he can’t believe I’m even here, let alone that I am pregnant. Then again, I’ve had months to get used to my condition. Hades has had less than an hour.

“So? Is it true?”

Looking around the penthouse’s living room, I feel a twinge in my back. There is a long dusty blue velvet couch a few feet away and I head for it. I’m tired as a dog and when I answer his question, it comes out sounding more irritable than I meant it to.

“Is what true?”

I collapse onto the couch, groaning quietly at the ache I can start to feel along my whole right side. Hades crosses his arms, looking for all the world as though he has just bitten into a bitter piece of fruit.

“Did you threaten to kill the child inside of you?”

I let my eyes drift closed for just a few seconds. “No. That’s not what I did at all. And besides, I was bluffing. He literally stole me away in the night and held me on an island where no one could speak English. I would’ve said or done almost anything in order to escape him.”

Hades casts a dour look at me. “So it is partially true.”

“Hades.” I open my eyes and pin him with a hard gaze. “I’m too tired to fight with you.”

“Well, tough shit.”

I make a cutting motion with my hand.

“I know that it runs counter to our usual dynamic. But I just can’t argue with you over something so stupid while you stand way over there, trying to decide if you can accept my pregnancy or not.”

“Yer putting word in my mouth,” he growls.

Fixing him with my gaze, I continue. “It isn’t really up for debate, Hades. I am pregnant. It is yours. And yes, I’ll take a test with a qualified doctor. I want to see a specialist as soon as possible. I don’t fucking care about the rest.”

Hades glares at me sharply. “Ye have a lot of demands.”

“I’ve been held on an island for four months by one of your brothers, Hades!” I explode. “Who, by the way, you just let off the hook without so much as a scolding. So yes, I have demands. And it’s about to get very real, very fast. I want to call the police. I want to press charges. I want that motherfucker to pay for the four months that I was trapped and kept from everyone I’ve ever known.”

Rage fills me with a trembling kind of hate. At the very same time, I can’t hold back my tears. Not just because I’m so hormonal and pregnant. But also because Ares scared the living daylights out of me and needs to be put in jail for a long, long time.

Hades is considering me, pushing out his cheek with the tip of his tongue.

“I won’t go to the authorities, lass.” He shrugs almost off-handedly. “Nothing in my life happens within the bounds of law enforcement. This shouldn’t be any different.”

Pursuing my lips, I press my hands to my belly. “It’s not your choice to make.”

Stalking over to me, he stares down at me until my heart rate beats double time.

“You are in so deep; you don’t even realize exactly how much trouble you’re in!” he thunders.

It’s a struggle for me to push to my feet. I can feel the baby stirring inside my body, as if turning away from his shouted voice. Raising a finger to my lips, I point at my stomach.

“Shhh. It doesn’t like people yelling.”

That causes him to pale slightly, stepping back. He looks down at my belly, frowning.

“How can you know that?”

“Because it kicks and moves around the most when there are raised voices. I think it knows the sound of my voice... and it can feel my heart rate rising, too.”

He glowers down at my stomach. “That’s it. I’m calling a fucking doctor. I can’t just wait around, not knowing whether you’re carrying my child or not.”

“First off, when you call someone, make it clear that you want an obstetrician. And second off... I already told you. It is yours. You’re the only one I’ve been with for years. And we didn’t do anything to prevent it so...” I wave a hand over my belly. “Here is the consequence of those reckless decisions.”

“I don’t need ye to explain how the birds and the bees work, lass.” He shoots me a fiery glance.

“No?”

He stares me down for a long moment. “I’ve spent months searching for ye, turning the entire world upside down. I thought I had lost ye. I thought I was doomed to... to a life of renewed solitude. Then I find ye, but within an hour I want to throttle ye.”

Pushing out a breath, I spread my hands over my belly. “I don’t want to argue, Hades. Call the doctor. Do your tests, as long as they don’t hurt the baby. Then we will be able to talk without this sword of Damocles hanging over us.”

He doesn’t like taking orders. I can tell that he wants to say as his gaze narrows on me. But he just fishes his phone out of his pocket and starts sending text messages.

I spend the rest of the day being poked and prodded by a grumpy obstetrician, taking a long bath, and then lying down for a brief nap that turned into a multi-hour affair.

When I wake up, I wrap myself in the fluffy white bathrobe provided by the hotel. My stomach rumbles and I head out into the living room, unsure what I should do for food.

I find Hades slumped on a couch in the living room, staring off into space. A torn-open letter lays on the couch beside him. His mood is somber.

He seems absorbed in thought even as I approach.

“I’m hungry,” I say softly. I sit down on the end of the sofa, trying to read his expression.

“It’s my child,” he says, seeming utterly lost. “How is that possible?”

In all the time I have known him, I haven’t seen Hades this lost. It makes him seem like a gigantic child who has misplaced a favorite toy.

“I thought you didn’t want me to tell you how babies are made.”

He raises his eyes to meet mine, a hint of humor there.

“I don’t. I just...” He pauses. “I guess that I am grappling with the idea of bringing a child into this world. This place that I have made so inhospitable for so long. For chrissake, I sell bloody nuclear arms to terrorists. I am hated, or feared, or at the very least hunted in almost every nation. How can I... how can I raise someone else to be dependent on me?”

“I can’t answer that question.” I clear my throat. “The doctor did tell me the sex of the baby, though. If you would like to know, I can tell you.”

“No.” Hades shakes his head and looks at me, paling. “I can’t handle any more today.”

I move the letter to the side, scooting over on the couch until my thigh touches his. Lifting my head, I carefully pull his face down to mine, brushing my lips with his. His arms encircle me, his mouth working against mine, his hands threading in my hair.

“Oh lass...” he whispers between kisses. “Fuck, I missed ye.”

His kisses are heady, exciting, almost drugging. Just as he says he missed me, I’ve missed him. My body has needed him.

My fingers dig into his shoulders. I move until I am all but in his lap, breathing hard, my pussy damp as it was the first time we fucked.

Hades drives a hand through my hair and holds me apart from his mouth for just a second. “I am sorry, Persephone. If I hadn’t kidnapped you, forced you to fit in my world, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Hades.” I take a deep breath in. “It wasn’t your decision. Ares felt that I was just too much of a distraction from your lives and your business.”

“Fuck our business. And... well, I look back on the time before I met you and think... what life did I have to miss?”

I swallow, blushing at the same time as tears well up.

“For months, I’ve dreamt that you would say just those words to me.”

He kisses my lips passionately. When he pulls back, he says, “I need you by my side, Persephone.”

I bite my lip. “I want to punish Ares for keeping us apart.”

“Aye. I will mete out justice to him. I swear to you.”

After looking at him for a long moment, I wipe at my overflowing eyes and nod.

“All right. I’ll leave it with you,” I whisper.

He wraps his arms around me, kissing me again.

“I’ve needed you, Penny. Longed for you.”

Intensity blooms in my chest as I scan his face, breathing hard. “I missed you too, Hades. There aren’t really words for how often I dreamt of escaping or of you finding me.”

His gaze is steady on mine. “I will never let you leave my side again. If someone takes you, I will be dead.”

I flinch. “Don’t say that.”

Hades pushes my hair back, shaping my face. “I mean it.”

I don’t know what to say, so I catch his fingers, bringing them to my lips for a soft kiss. He glances down at my stomach for just a second before glancing away again guiltily.

“We need to retreat. I need time to think, to plan my next move. This... this child was not something I had even thought possible.”

I cock my head. “Oh?”

The last part of his question was the bit that I responded to. What had he thought was possible, then?

But Hades just gets a faraway look in his eye. “We’ll have to go somewhere we won’t be followed. Not even by my brothers. Which puts Scotland out of the question.”

I lean back, placing a hand on my belly.

“Where are you thinking of?”

He takes a deep breath and pushes it out.

“We have to go to the last place that my brothers would think of to look for me. A place that I have never been.”

“So...” I squint. “New Zealand?”

“Nae.” Hades shakes his head. “I am thinking of a place much closer than that... but also much colder. Somewhere that no one will think to look.”

I make a puzzled gesture. “Where?”

“My mother is somewhere in Scandinavia. And I think we should shelter near there too. Just until I know what our next move will be.”

My eyebrows leap up. “Your mother is alive?”

He nods, squinting off toward the window. “Aye. At least, she was. I had a private investigator look into her life about ten years ago. I never pushed to know more cause... ye know, why would I? But I think that now, with everything...”

I grab his hand, pulling it to my heart.

“I would love to visit your mom.”

Hades holds up a hand. “Easy, now. I’m only suggesting it because it’s someplace that I’ve told my brothers that I never want to go. As far as actually seeing Ma...” He trails off and then shrugs. “Let’s just make sure that we’re somewhere hidden first.”

And then, Hades will have to deal with the fact that he’s about to share a world where his baby girl will live.

My lips twitch. “Okay. One thing at a time.”

The loud growl of my stomach interrupts us. Hades pulls a face but then scoots away, helping me up. “Come on. Let’s feed you.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

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HADES

My text messages from Eros tell their own story quite elegantly.

Where are you???

Hades, what the fuck?

Seriously???????

Hades, ye fucking bastard. If this is a joke, it's not funny.

There is a pause that last almost an entire day.

Then:

Just talked with Ares. He says something happened with Persephone. But he's being evasive. I think it has to do with why you're not answering messages...

Silently heaving a sigh, I tuck my phone safely in the inner pocket of my coat. I'm not exactly sure how I should respond to Eros or even if I will at all. It's unclear if he knew about Ares' little plan. And until I determine that, I have to protect Penny first.

My arms and legs are cramped from hours spent in the close confines of this little plane. The pilot and the cockpit are only separated from the single row of passenger seats by a flimsy partial wall. Immediately behind my body, I can feel what little luggage we brought pressing against the back of my seat. The rumble of the engines is uncomfortably close, a constant reminder of just how close we are to falling out of the sky and plunging to our deaths.

Penny seems to not notice. Most of the flights, she's spent asleep or drowsing.

The pilot of our little prop plane turns his head toward me, shouting through the gap in the wall. "We should be on the runway in fifteen minutes

or less!"

I nod. My phone chimes again and I ignore it. There are other factors holding my attention just now, like the not insignificant challenge of getting myself and Penny off of the grid and up to Norway to begin with.

My phone chimes and I grit my teeth. The only reason I even still have phone is that my phone sends anyone trying to track it on a wild goose chase of seemingly random phone numbers that rotate every few seconds as they are being tracked.

Silencing the phone, I turn to my right. Persephone is asleep in the seat beside me, mouth open slightly, raven hair askew.

I touch her arm gently and she jerks awake, eyes opening wide. "What's happening?"

I purse my lips. "We're finally going to land."

She sits up, touching her hair and blinking sleepily. "We've been on planes for the better part of the last twenty four hours, Hades. I really want to leave this plane and never look at another teeny tiny flying vessel." She pulls a face. "Being trapped in this tiny tin can has making me feel sick since we first took off."

"What? You're not feeling well?"

She shakes her head but doesn't delve into the subject. I give her a shrug.

"We're almost on the ground. We only took so many flights because I needed to put a firm layer of security in place and disguise our movements. I'm just trying to keep us safe."

She gives me a watery half smile and pats my hand. "I know."

Persephone looks away, lifting the window shade. I feel a little guilty, as part of my precautions were to take a series of untraceable flights between Spain, England, and Wales. I also booked a flight to Australia with two people flying under our names on board.

If the cost is just money, I'll spend it all if it means that we will slip untraced in Norway's coastal islands.

Penny grips my hand as the plane descends. Our landing is more than a little rough but soon enough, we are taxiing down a very small private runway that's the closest I could get to Island.

We finally climb out of the plane, blinking into the bright morning sunlight. It's chilly here, a cold breeze blowing off the water and cutting me to the bone. The runway tarmac is just a stretch of asphalt on land that's

about a football field's length from the roaring of the dark blue ocean. I shield my eyes and gaze around, but there is little enough to see.

There is the ocean to our right, the single airplane hangar immediately in front of us. And to our right, an enormous grassy field spreads out wide. In the distance, I see some grassy bluffs. But mostly, there is nothing here.

I pull out an envelope, handing it to our pilot for services rendered. Penny shivers and squints up at me, curious.

“What next?”

Holding up a finger, I silently tell her to wait. I grab our bags and pull her along, not wanting the pilot to have specifics.

We head around the far side of the airplane hangar, where there is an old car waiting for us.

“We’re going in that?” Penny asks.

Trying to remain reassuring, I put our backs into the backseat. “It’s all I could manage at the very last minute. From what I gather, there are not really any car rentals to be had here.”

Penny raises a brow but don’t complain. We get in and head out, following the only road that leads through the grassy field and crawls along the sandy coast.

The sand is almost white here, nearly blending in with the sun-bleached grass that grows quite close to the shore. From the car windows, the water looks so deep blue that it’s nearly black, the waves ebbing and flowing onto the sand.

Looking at it, the view is quite bleak. I wonder, suddenly, if this is the view that my mother has been looking at since she arrived here.

A muscle tics in my jaw. I look back at the road, forcing my mind to worry about more important things. Like making sure I’m not being followed or otherwise surveilled in any way.

But checking the rearview mirror is simple enough. As we leave the tarmac behind, the road behind us remains empty. This place is remote, to say the very least.

I open my mouth to say something to Penny. But her head is leaning against the window and her eyes are closed. I frown.

She can’t possibly still be tired. She has slept almost all day, despite the airplane being uncomfortable to relax in.

My eye traces a line down from her sleeping face to her swollen stomach. I swallow and avert my gaze, focusing on the road. Definitely

easier not to think about how my life is going to change soon. Or about the fact that I helped to make a tiny human being. And it is growing and growing inside her body, all the time.

Persephone has morphed into a ticking time bomb and I have to figure out how the fuck to deal with it. While at the same time coping with my brothers and Constantine and anyone else that might want to hurt either Persephone or myself.

Around the car, the wild, long grasses begin to grow shorter and less shaggy. The world takes on a distinctly green hue. The ocean recedes from the road, although it is still visible and vast.

I drag a hand over my mouth and chin as I try to break it down, step by step.

A half an hour later, I drive the car around a wide turn, still thinking through my options. I notice a weather-worn sign that says SULA on the right side of the road.

And like as if by magic, a lighthouse suddenly juts out at the earth, a tall white building that is worn with age. Just behind it, the town suddenly appears, a jumble of white buildings with black roofs and red buildings with white roofs. The buildings stand in stark relief against the vibrant green grass and the brilliance of the few rocky bluffs. The houses are placed seemingly at random elevations, many forming small clusters.

I slow down as I enter the town, reaching over to wake Penny up. Her shoulder feels hot to the touch. When she wakes, she sits up, and I can see a sheen of sweat on her brow.

“Are ye feeling okay?” I ask.

Persephone yawns. “Maybe I’m coming down with something.” She shrugs a shoulder. “Please tell me we are about to arrive somewhere with a real bed and a hot shower.”

“Aye. According to my phone, we’re three minutes out.”

She looks around, glassy eyed. “That’s nice.”

Casting a glance over her form, I try to guess at what might be wrong with her. Is this something that is normal for pregnant women?

Or is it more insidious than that?

For a hot second, I lament the fact that I never even considered becoming a doctor. In the military, I suppose I had a choice... But I was already too busy cracking skulls to even think about taking that path. I can

always get a doctor... but there are very few men with my set of unique skills in the world.

Same for my brothers. I suppose we Lyon men are a violent clan.

My phone buzzes, declaring that I have reached my destination. Pulling up outside the little cabin I've rented, I consider it for a moment.

Penny clears her throat. "It's very tidy looking. I like the red walls and white roof." She tilts her head. "It looks cozy."

Getting out of the car, I eye the cabin. It is really chilly here, colder than I expected and twice as windy.

Persephone yelps as an unexpected blast of cold air hits her as she climbs out of the air.

"Ah! I'm going straight inside!"

She rubs her arms as she sprints the short distance to the cabin and lets herself inside.

Taking a moment to take our bags from the trunk, I cast a glance around and see a distant neighbor looking at us. His dark hair blows in the sharp, cool wind. He shields his eyes against the sun and zips up his dark parka. When he sees me notice him, he gives me a two fingered salute and heads inside the nearest building.

Surveying the rest of the scene takes less than a minute. Then I lug the bags inside the warmth of the cabin, closing the door. The inside of the cabin is indeed cozy, with a large modular fireplace taking up most of one whole wall. Opposing the fireplace is a simple living room set up, a couch and a chair, piled high with blankets and surrounded by bookcases filled with books. There is a small, tidy kitchen, a very tiny bathroom, and a cramped bedroom.

The bed, piled high with colorful wool blankets, looks particularly inviting. That's where I find Penny, already sleepily tucking herself in. She covers up her entire body, leaving only her face sticking out.

"It's nice in here," she croaks.

I move to stand over her, feeling her forehead. She's unbelievably hot and seems to be having trouble staying awake.

"I think you need a doctor," I tell her.

Penny yawns, throwing back the covers on the other side of the bed. "Come here. Spoon me. That's all I need."

Kicking off my shoes, I start to unbutton my shirt. But even before I climb underneath the covers, Persephone is asleep again.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

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HADES

A sharp kick wakes me from my sleep near twilight. I squint at the window, trying to decide what time it is, what day. I still feel sleep deprived, so I'm guessing I've only been asleep for a few hours.

Another kick rouses me from my stupor. I roll over to find that Persephone stirs restlessly, still dreaming but muttering g and moving her arms and legs. She has thrown off the covers and glistens with sweat; the sheets around her body are damp with perspiration too.

I reach out a hand and touch her forehead. Her skin is flushed and hot under my hand. It's been ages since I've seen anyone this feverish. Not since I was a child and my little brothers both caught some viral infection that had them both sweating through the sheets.

I feel about as useful now as I did back then. My fists tighten as I try to rouse Penny.

"Penny." I shake her, at first gently but then again with more vigor.
"Penny, wake up."

Her eyes open for a moment, seeming bright against the flush of her cheeks. She opens her mouth, senseless words burbling out.

"I don't want my hair brushed."

"Lass, it's me," I say, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Do you think you can sit up?"

Penny tries to tug her arm from my grasp, frowning. She is pretty insistent when she speaks, although her words don't make any sense.

"They said the pony won the race, Mom. Stop bothering me about it."

Then her eyes close again and she relaxes, sagging backward into the mattress.

“Fuck.”

She’s really sick. And of course she would be sick here, of all places... where I don’t have anyone I can call or a hospital to take her to.

A snide little voice sounds in the back of my head. This is why you live your life the way you do. If you don’t care for anyone, you aren’t responsible for their health and well-being.

The thought rings through my head, but I shove it aside. What I need at just this moment is to be practical. How can I get Persephone medical attention?

Leaving Persephone where she is, I pull on clothes and stuff myself into my suit jacket and combat boots. Then I venture outside, scanning the immediate countryside as the sun sets. The sunlight looks different here than it did in Spain. Down south, the setting sunlight showed a dazzling array of pinks and purples and brilliant navy blues. But here the sun is more cool and remote, just fading away with yellows turning into deep browns.

There are several people that I can see from my front door, although they are quite far away. They are all wrapped in their parkas and going about their business, paying little attention to me.

I pull my phone out, checking the map. It indicates that there something akin to a downtown here, several blocks that are lined with shops. Looking for a hospital, I find that the only place listed is a small building just off the so-called main drag.

It’s work getting Persephone up and coaxing her into the passenger seat of the car. She is still sweating profusely, heat rolling off her body. As I throw the car into drive, I cast a sideways glance at her belly.

I’m pretty sure that being so close to that heat can’t be good for the baby. My chest tightens at the thought of having to tell Penny that I took a nap while her baby — our baby — roasted inside of her.

In the few minutes it takes to reach the small medical clinic, I’ve already pictured having to tell Persephone the worst news three different times. I get her out of the car, lifting her in my arms.

She murmurs but doesn’t resist as I carry her inside the clinic waiting room, her bright red cheeks reminding me of a rag doll.

I elbow the door open, showing a small waiting room area, a reception desk behind a wall, and a hallway that leads into the back of the clinic.

A young woman greets us as I storm in, her eyes widening. She sits at the reception desk, her tone calm, and asks me a question in an intelligible

language.

“English or Français?” I ask her.

She shoots to her feet, coming around the front walls to stand before me and assess Persephone. The frown on her face has my heart rate doubling. That can’t be good.

She holds up one finger, asking me to wait.

She vanishes down the hallway and I hear her muffled voice, entreating someone else to come see.

I grip Penny tighter, noticing that her sweat has seeped into my rumpled button up shirt.

“It’s okay,” I murmur to her. “We’re going to get you all fixed up.”

I have no way of knowing that, but I soothe her nonetheless.

When the young woman returns, she has an older woman in tow. The woman is about fifty, and trim, with steely gray streaks running through her dark bun. She looks at me through the keenest eyes, her footsteps stopping when we make eye contact. “Ye need help?” she asks. Her accent is faintly Scottish, watered down with a good dose of Norwegian.

My heart thumps loudly in my ears. My mouth goes dry. I clutch Penny to my chest, swallowing hard.

This woman may very well be my mother, whom I haven’t seen in over twenty years.

The woman clears her throat, schooling her expression. She gestures to Penny. “This is the patient, I assume?”

“Aye,” I agree, nodding tightly. “Persephone.”

She arches a brow, clearly thinking something. But she briskly pushes that aside, tapping my arm. As she does, I catch the name on her badge on the lanyard around her neck.

Magda Renner.

I swallow convulsively. I have no idea where the last name came from. But Magda is my mother’s name. The fact that we came to hide in her small town means that it’s unlikely to be a coincidence. Add in the fact that she’s a Scot...

I’m looking at my mother, who abandoned me years ago. And right now, she’s the only person that can help me with my sick patient.

Magda views me coolly. “Bring her into the back, please.”

She sweeps along, leaving me to follow her down the darkened hallway. At the first room we come to, she pushes the door open and ushers me

inside. There is a small desk with a computer, a chair, and a long white cot.

While Magda pulls on a pair of latex gloves, she motions for me to put Penny down on the cot. I stare at the woman for several beats.

My mother immediately takes over the whole situation, snapping commands. “Put her down, please. And step back. I need room to work.”

Hesitantly, I set Penny down on the cot and move away from her. She clings to me, catching my hand, making sure that I don’t go far.

My breath catches in my throat. “Please,” I whisper, looking up at Magda. “Tell me that she’ll be all right.”

Magda frowns, picking up a bright pink stethoscope from the desk. She takes half a minute to wipe down the stethoscope and throw the alcohol wipe away, her movements practiced and precise.

I remember that Magda always had a meticulous manner, even when she was merely nursing one of my little brothers when we were children. Always with the same air of grace and gravity as she moves with now.

Magda presses the stethoscope against Penny’s chest over her heart, listening carefully. Her face gives nothing away as I wait, my own heartbeat thundering in my ears.

Magda moves the stethoscope around Penny’s chest, then pulls it free of her ears. “How far along is Persephone?”

“Uh...” I do a quick search of my brain. I feel so out of place, completely without the usual confidence that guides my every thought and move. “Five months, I guess?”

“And when did she last eat?”

I scrunch up my face. “Last night. She had a sandwich on the plane.”

“And ye? Did ye eat the same thing?”

A moment’s hesitation passes before I shake my head.

“No. I thought the tuna salad didn’t look very appealing. Is that what this is? Food poisoning?”

“Maybe.” Magda presses several spots over Persephone’s stomach, seeming satisfied that she doesn’t yelp or squirm. She turns her head, yelling behind her in what I assume is Norwegian. I don’t get anything from it except that I think she calls the young woman Sigrid.

Sigrid appears with an IV pole, holding a plastic bag filled with what looks like saline. She shoos me back a couple of steps and busies herself prepping Penny’s hand and inserting the IV into her. It is quick, maybe three minutes total, and then she hangs the IV bag up.

She asks Magda a question and Magda nods. Then the young woman disappears. Magda looks at me.

“Sigrid is going to draw some blood. I’m fairly sure that it’s just a really bad case of food poisoning, but I want to rule out a few major things just to be on the safe side. There is no real reason to worry but it’s better safe than sorry with pregnant women.”

“Test for everything. Spare no expense. Penny’s carrying my baby and I want to be assured that absolutely nothing bad happens to either of them.”

The last part leaves my lips, blurted without even thinking about it. Magda blinks, processing the information. She looks at me for a long beat, her eyes narrowing on my face.

“I’ll do everything that I can.” She pauses for a second. “We’ll get her comfortable. And then ye can tell me just what we’re doing way up here, Hades.”

My stomach drops down to my feet. My first instinct is to be angry and defensive.

“Let me be clear as crystal. My priority is Penny. Without her, we wouldn’t be in this clinic. And we definitely did not come to this part of the world and walk into this clinic, hoping that we would find you. We are not here to talk about the past or find any kind of closure. Is that understood?”

Magda pales at my tone, her expression growing hard. “And here was me thinking that ye had finally come to see me. Ye sound just like yer father, ye know.”

My face contorts. Her well-aimed arrow finds its soft target, right in the center of what passes for my heart.

“Make sure that Persephone is well cared for,” I hiss. “If she doesn’t get better, and soon, ye will see just how much like my father I can be.”

To my complete surprise, Magda flinches and turns away. She practically races out of the room, leaving me feeling rather tense.

Persephone murmurs and I step close to her, taking her hand once more. But my eyes remain fixed on the doorway that Magda just vacated.

CHAPTER NINE

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PERSEPHONE

Before I'm even fully awake, I'm conscious of Hades carrying on a whispered argument with someone else. His voice is tense and on edge.

Why isn't she awake yet?

An answer comes, the voice female. But it is quieter... and straining to hear it makes me so very tired.

Hades whispers again. I can practically envision his clenched teeth and stony glare.

Ye said Penny would be awake by now. Ye lied to me.

If there is an answer to his accusation, I miss it. I'm pulled down again, my sleep growing deeper. His voice invades my dreams though. It makes me restless. I want to be awake. I want to see his face, touch his cheek, comfort him.

But my body is so tired, my limbs so heavy. I submit to the darkness, allowing it to swallow me. What else am I to do?

When I finally surface, my eyes fluttering open, I find myself lying under a thin blanket on a cot. Hades is draped across my body, with the bulk of his frame sitting on the floor. I try to lift my arm and accidentally tug an IV that is plastered to my left hand.

“What the fuck?” I say.

The slight noise is more than enough to wake Hades from his light doze. His head pops up and relief pools across his expression like the tide rushing in.

“Yer awake!” he grunts. Hades puts a hand to my forehead. “How do you feel?”

I can feel that my hair has matted just above the place his fingers touch and I reach up, slowly piecing together the clues.

“I’ve been sick, I guess.” I wince, my throat scratchy. “Where are we?”

“Sula’s medical clinic. It’s a catch-all for everything from the surrounding areas that isn’t urgent enough for being air-lifted to an actual hospital.”

My head pounds faintly and I rub at my temple. “Oh. Well... what’s my diagnosis?”

A woman’s voice answers as the woman in question pushes the door open. She’s a dark haired woman of fifty, a bit on the thin side and wearing a matching pair a deep under-eye shadows.

“You must be Persephone.” She enters the room, all but ignoring Hades. She warms her hands up by rubbing them together and pulls on a pair of latex gloves. “I’m Magda. And ye have been here for about ten hours with one the worst cases of food poisoning that I’ve ever seen.”

My hands trail under my blanket, over my stomach. “Oh god. Is... is my baby okay?”

“It should be fine. If yer worried, I would ask yer regular OB to do a full checkup.”

I can feel my cheeks stain a bright red. “I don’t have one here yet. We only just arrived. And to be completely honest, we’re not sure how long we are planning to stay.”

Hades slides his hand around my shoulders. I glance up at him, but he’s giving Magda his stoniest glare.

“Sorry, am I missing something?” I ask, feeling out of sorts.

Magda gives me a cool smile. “No. Yer fine. And it is fine if ye don’t have a regular doctor in Scandinavia. I’m a midwife. So is Sigrid, the young lady who works at the front desk.”

Hades grimaces. “I’ll have a specialist brought in.”

Sliding him an odd look, I frown. “Surely that won’t be necessary.”

He stares at me with a fiery expression for a moment, but then ends up shrugging.

“As ye wish.”

I glance between him and Magda. Hades is glaring at her. She is decidedly staring away from him, scrolling through something on her desktop computer screen.

What is going on between them?

Magda speaks to me, but her eyes remain fixed on the screen. “If ye don’t mind, I could do a quick obstetrical exam in here. I would just need to get my kit from my car.”

For some reason, her lilting Scottish accent just now hits me over the head. My mouth opens.

“Your accent...” I say.

Her cheeks color. She cuts her eyes, making me realize that they are the same piercing shade as Hades’ eyes.

“You’re his mom!” I blurt out.

They both jump at the excited loudness of my tone.

“Penny...” Hades grits out.

His mother pushes out her cheek with her tongue, darting a glance at me. But she doesn’t say a word.

“Oh.” I feel a wave of nausea coming on. “I see where he gets that expression from.”

She gives me a hard glance, her lips thinning. “I’m going to go get my obstetrical kit.”

As soon as she is gone, Hades turns to me with a sigh. “I’ll trust ye not to make this harder for me than needs must. We came here because ye were out of yer mind with fever. I didn’t plan on ever laying eyes on the woman.”

Struggling onto my elbows, I take a deep breath, willing the sick feeling to pass. After half a minute, it does. I sit up, peeling away the thin cotton blanket plastered to my upper body.

“Hades.”

He looks over at me, rubbing my back.

“Ye are looking better, at least.”

“Don’t think for one second that you’re going to get away with acting like a child. I know that you must have a million thoughts about seeing her again. And I would hazard a guess that they are a complex mix of good and bad memories.”

I give my head a shake, freeing my hair from the hair elastic I put it up in.

Hades’ mouth sets in a firm line. “Jaysus, lass. I have you here, feverish and spouting gibberish. I don’t know what’s happening with the babe in your belly, whether it is all right or not. Isn’t that enough to worry about right at this precise moment?”

I sigh. "Sorry. Of course it is." My hand comes up to rest on the top of my stomach. "I think she's fine, though. She's kicking like a swimmer trying to win the gold at the Olympics. Here, see?"

I take his hand, placing it on my stomach. Hades locks eyes with me, a long breath escaping him.

"She?"

"Oh!" My hand flies to my mouth. "Shoot, I wasn't supposed to tell you. I'm so sorry."

"No. No." He shakes his head, glancing down at my belly. "A girl."

He moves his hand in slow circles over my swollen stomach. What he's thinking is anyone's guess. But his hand passes over a spot where our daughter decides to kick doubly hard, and his eyes widen. He looks to me, his expression emotional.

"Was that her?"

I nod. My eyes mist up as I watch him, exploring my belly, using his touch to shape the growing baby just inside.

"That's pretty incredible," he murmurs. "Does it hurt when she kicks like that?"

I scrunch my face up. "Sometimes."

He opens his mouth, about to ask another question. This moment is so long overdue. Having Hades touch me like this, feel my pregnant belly...

Dreaming of this moment was what sustained me for all those months I was trapped on the island. I'm loathe to interrupt, to even say anything at all.

Just watching Hades as he rubs my belly gives me an intense joy that I can't quite properly express. So instead of coming out of my mouth, it comes out as tears.

He looks up, alarmed. "What? Did I do something wrong?"

"No!" I say tearfully. "Definitely not."

Magda comes into the tiny room, looking between us with a note of suspicion.

"Everything okay? Persephone, if you would like, I can tell Hades to wait outside..."

Sniffling, I cut her off. "Thank you, Magda. But he didn't do anything. I'm just a mess of hormones." I pause for a second. "You must remember what it was like to be quite pregnant."

Magda slams her medical bag on the counter, making me tense up.

“Not really,” she says drily.

Hades steps back, giving me a look.

“Let’s just let the woman do the exam. Okay?”

I try to sit back and relax as she performs some basic tests, most of which involve her listening to my belly with a (special stethoscope) and asking fairly personal, invasive questions.

Magda does a brief examination of my belly, then gives me a small smile.

“I think your baby is healthy, Persephone. If you are going to be here for long, I would advise you to sign up for a sonogram. We have them here, twice a month. The sonogram truck comes around and we try to get all our expectant mothers in the clinic at least once a month.”

I crinkle my nose, looking up at Hades.

“I don’t really know how long I’m going to be here. Sorry. But I would like to sign up, assuming that I am still here.”

Magda gives Hades a long look. “Ye can’t be carting Persephone around the world, you know. Your brother Eros says that you travel a lot for your work, but—”

“He WHAT?” Hades looks dumbfounded. “Did ye just say that my brother is in contact with ye?”

Magda purses her lips. “Aye.”

He whips out his wallet, shaking with barely-concealed rage. “How much do I owe ye for today? Hmm?”

She clears her throat, looking at me.

“I don’t feel right taking yer money, Hades.”

Hades pulls out everything that he has, throwing it down on the end of the cot.

“There. That should be more than enough,” he says, his voice cold as ice. “Please, for the love of god. Do me a favor. Do not tell the worthless gobshites known as my brothers that ye’ve seen me. Okay? I do not want them to know where I am.” He fixes her with an icy glare. “They are out to harm the mother of my child. Do ye understand?”

Magda gives a slow, hesitant nod. “Aye. I understand, Hades. I won’t tell a soul if that’s yer wish.”

“It is. Now get this IV line off of Penny so that we can leave.” He snakes his arm around me protectively, shooting her a sour look. “I want to take her to our cabin to recuperate.”

She moves to take the IV out of my hand, quickly swiping it with an alcohol pad and covering it with a small sticky bandage. All the while she's studying my face.

"You can tell me anything," she says to me. "You know that, right?"

I take a deep breath, looking between her and Hades. There are a ton of unspoken things hovering in the air, just above their heads. But I am tired and honestly, I just don't have enough fight in my body to say anything.

I reach out, touching her hand, gripping it. She looks at me with a completely surprised expression.

"Thank you, Magda," I say, squeezing her hand. "You've been so nice to me. I cannot repay that kindness just yet. But I don't expect that we have seen the last of each other."

I swear, for a long moment I see some unnamed, deep emotion in Magda's eyes. Then she blinks several times, releases my hand, and steps back.

"I hope to see you again. As a midwife, if nothing else."

Then she gives the oddest little bow and sweeps out of the room, vanishing down the hallway. I look at Hades, trying to guess at his feelings from his expression.

But his face is blank.

He squeezes my shoulders. "Come on. Let's get you to the car."

I stand up on shaky legs and he sweeps me off my feet, making me blush. Lying my head down against the warmth of his chest, I listen to his heartbeat as he carries me to the car.

CHAPTER TEN

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PERSEPHONE

When I have slept for what seems like days rather than hours, I finally force myself to get up. I don't recognize the clothes I'm wearing but they are still vaguely damp with sweat. I'm thirsty enough to head into the bathroom and drink from the tap.

Once my thirst is slaked, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and pale. My long raven locks has grown matted, my oversized tee-shirt looking... well, dirty.

After a quick sniff of my armpits, I pull a face and get myself into the shower. Under the steamy jets of water, I start thinking about food.

It's been too long since I've had food. Long enough that I can't quite remember my last meal.

I wash myself as quickly as I can and then sprint through toweling off my body. Taking advantage of the cabin's full stock of beauty products, I lather my entire body in lotion, including my face.

Wiping the steam from the mirror, I check to make sure that I haven't left any streaks of lotion on my face. That's when I see my belly reflected back at me.

I tilt my head and turn to the side, pressing my hands against my stomach. It looks as though I have swallowed three quarters of a basketball. I run my hands over my belly button, which has just begun to puff up like it intends to begin pointing out at any moment.

My breasts are looking overstuffed, nestled weightily again the very top of my stomach. This is not my body. I wave, just to check, and feel silly about it after. The body I see reflected back at me is so different from how I feel most of the time.

“Persephone?” Hades calls. “Are you okay in there?”

“Just... just putting lotion on!” I call out. Flushing, I pull on a loose caftan and pile my hair up in a towel.

Opening the door to the bedroom, I can see that Hades has stripped the bed. He’s in the process of putting a new set of sheets on the bed and he looks up at me, gauging how I seem to feel.

I turn a deeper shade of red. “You shouldn’t be doing that!”

Hurrying around the bed, I try to stop him. Hades pauses for a moment, looking at me like I’m crazy.

“What are you doing?”

“I can change the sheets.” I reach out, trying to tug them out of his hands.

He points to the doorway. “Jaysus, Persephone. Get sit down on the couch. Let me finish here.”

“No!” I say, stubbornly. “You shouldn’t have to take care of me. I can do it.”

He drops the sheets on the bed. For a split second, I think I’m getting my wish. But he bends down, scoops me up, and carries me out of the bedroom. I whoop, surprised.

“What are you doing?”

Hades carries me out to the couch and carefully places me on it, covering me with a heavy woolen throw. When I try to move, he glares at me.

“Stop,” he says, pointing an accusatory finger at me. “I mean it.”

His glare pins me in place and I nod, a little dazed. He vanishes into the bedroom, coming out a few minutes later with a pile of linens. He looks around, shrugs, and tosses the pile onto the floor near the wall.

“I’ll deal with that later. For now... do ye think ye can eat?”

I perk up at the mention of food. “Yes. I thought I would see what was in the cabinets that I could potentially cook.”

“If you so much as move, I’ll come over there and move ye back. Okay? I’m in charge today. Yer the patient.”

“Hades!” I protest.

“Not a word. Ye’ve been sick as a dog. I thought that I might lose ye after I had only just found ye again. So ye can still there and let me mother ye.”

He stares me down as he says it and I flush.

"I don't remember most of the last day," I reply softly.

"Days," Hades says. "It's been a few days that we've been here, lass. I've had Magda coming to check on ye four times a day."

I raise my eyebrows, surprised. "Days? I know I had a fever, but I didn't realize so much time had passed."

Hades shrugs a shoulder and walks to the primitive kitchen. "I'm just glad you are firmly back in the land of the living. How does toad in a hole sound?"

I scrunch up my face. "I don't know what that is."

"It's eggs and toast, fried together."

My mouth starts watering at the idea of eggs. "Honestly? It sounds amazing."

"Right." He turns away from me, busying himself with butter, bread, and eggs. It's hard to tell what he is thinking.

He moves around the compact kitchen with the same ease as he does any and everything. Precisely, accurately, and lightning fast. As soon as he puts a pad of butter in a frying pan and adds bread, my stomach starts growling. In no time at all, he plates a steaming, delicious-smelling piece of toast with an egg in the middle and sets it on the tiny breakfast nook table.

He doesn't even have to tell me to come get it because as soon as he sets it down, I fall on it like I've been starved for a fortnight. I wolf it down without waiting for a fork.

Hades casts a gaze over me as he begins making another one, smirking a little.

"Good?" he prompts.

I look up, my mouth crammed full of bread and egg, and blush ten shades of red. Nodding, I make myself slow down and actually chew the food in my mouth. All I want is to inhale this plateful and demand that he make me another. When I am crunching the last bite of crust, he asks the question that I so desperately want to hear.

"Do ye want another piece, then?"

I look at him with an embarrassed smile.

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble, yes."

"Persephone, I'll gladly feed ye any place and any time that ye'll let me." Hades comes over the table and slides another piece of toast onto my plate. "Here, lass."

“Thank you so much.” I look up at him, my eyes suddenly filling with tears. My emotions are all over the place right now and there is no regulating them.

He smiles softly and turns away. But I grab his hand, pulling him back. I stand up, throw my arms around him, and hug him as hard as I can. I take all the love and caring and gratitude that I feel inside and try to show him that by clasping him against my body extra hard.

His hands come up to clumsily pat my back at first. But then he closes his arms around me, encasing me in his embrace. I press my face into his shirt, inhaling his unique scent.

Hades brings his hand up and caresses the back of my head.

“Right now, I feel so safe. So cared for,” I murmur against his chest. Closing my eyes, I exhale a full, deep breath. “I want our daughter to feel this way.”

“Ach.” Hades grips me tighter for just a second before he loosens his grasp and pulls back. “Penny, I can’t believe I am holding ye. I can’t believe ye are real. And...” His brows quirk, his expression emotional. “I wanted to say that I am sorry that I made ye test to see if the baby’s mine. I should have known ye wouldn’t lie to me.”

I blow out a breath. “As long as you are satisfied now, I can forgive and forget.”

“Aye. I would say I’m more than satisfied.” His eyes are hard against mine. “I’ve come to care for ye, Persephone.”

My heart hammers against my chest.

“You do?”

“Aye. I would think it is apparent. It’s not every lass that comes along that I make breakfast for.”

“Just the ones carrying your baby?” I tease.

The corner of his mouth curls up. “Just ye, for now. Yer as much as I can handle.”

I push up onto my tiptoes, pressing my lips against his. Gripping his shirt, I don’t give him any choice. I’m embarrassed by how badly I need his affection right now.

Hades growls against my lips. Putting his hands under my ass, he lifts me up and deepens the kiss.

I nip his lower lip and grind myself against his lower body, my thoughts turning straight up pornographic. But he eases me back, panting.

“Uh uh,” Hades says, shaking his head. “None of that. Not until you’ve been fever free for a couple of days. I need to know that we’re in the clear before I do anything but kiss you.”

Pouting, I stick my tongue out at him.

“Quit sounding so reasonable.”

I kiss him again, moaning a little when his tongue brushes mine. He makes a strangled sound.

Hades sets me down and adjusts his slacks, where his erection is incredibly long, hard, and present. He looks at me and shakes a finger at me.

“Don’t tease me. It isn’t nice. Eat yer toad in a hole, for the love of all things holy.”

He turns away, adjusting his slacks again, and returns to cooking. Picking up my slice of toast, I bite into it, staring at Hades’ ass while I eat.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

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HADES

Carrying a small breakfast tray into the cramped bedroom of the cabin, I set it down with a flourish. Penny eyes me.

“Thanks.”

She obviously has more to say, but frowns at a piece of toast instead.

“You’ve been quiet today,” I tell her. “I expected that you would have started to give me a thousand different opinions about the baby and my mother.”

She arches a brow at me. “I could say the same about you. Besides, I’ve been asleep for most of the last day.”

I push the plate of toast and eggs an inch toward her. She smiles, brief and hard.

“Thank you for breakfast. But it’s been two days since I was at the clinic. I don’t think it’s necessary for you to keep bringing me food on a tray. Not when I am perfectly capable of getting up.” She hesitates. “And I do have a lot of feelings about meeting your mother. Not to mention you finally acknowledging our daughter.”

“That isn’t fair. I only had a day to absorb the fact that you showed up after four months, pregnant.”

She picks up the toast, jerking her chin to indicate the bed. “Please, Hades. Sit down. You’re making me anxious just standing there.”

Penny bites into the bit of toast delicately. I sit on the edge of the bed and look at her posture. She sits with a pillow jammed behind her back, which makes her pregnant belly even more pronounced. A turbulent wave of emotions come over me every time I think about the baby for too long.

Anger. Hope. And a distinct note of fear.

I try to clamp down on my emotions, see things reasonably. But it is very hard with Penny right here.

Persephone notices my glance and puts a protective hand on her stomach. “You haven’t even touched me since we came home from the clinic.”

“You’ve been sick.”

Her eyes narrow. “It’s funny. I thought that we had a breakthrough while we were at the clinic. You were touching my belly and acting... well, honestly, pretty shockingly emotional about her existence. But since then, you’ve been cagey.”

I blow out a breath. “Of course you feel that way. You want me to be weak. You are always poking holes in my armor. It seems like something you can’t help but do.”

She takes a bite of her toast, chewing and swallowing. “I’m interested in seeing how you feel about things. I’m interested in you being vulnerable with me.”

My gaze snaps to hers. “I’m supposed to be an impenetrable wall. I am trying desperately to be untouchable. And you keep looking at me with that pretty (blue) gaze of yours, inviting me to touch you, to feel all the things that I shouldn’t. How about I supposed to be close to you and not be... weak?”

Persephone pushes the tray away, moving closer to me. She takes my hand, placing my palm against her belly. My entire body stiffens.

“This is what I am talking about! It’s killing me to think about what will happen to you and our daughter in the near future. I can’t be an internationally known villain when I have... such obvious weaknesses.”

She purses her lips. “I agree with you. You can’t be an arms dealer and have me stashed away. There will come a point where you will have to choose.”

I scowl at her belly. “Exactly.”

She tilts her head. For a long moment, I have no idea what she could be thinking. But then she draws my hand over her breast, spreading my palm wide so that I can feel her heart beating.

I look at her, uncomfortable. Penny lifts her chin and stares me down.

“I am real. And I’m right here. Your baby is right here. We aren’t going to go away unless you decide to abandon us.”

My gaze hardens. “Ye think I would do that? After my mother left me, I turned out like such a bastard. The thought that I would do that to another child... worse, to my own child—”

“But you can’t have it both ways. You can either have the family you always wanted. Or you can make the same choice as your father likely did and drive out the woman you feel the need to protect.”

Sneering, I shake my head and shoot to my feet.

“I am not my father!”

She stands too, following me as I leave the claustrophobic bedroom. I pace to the front window of our little cabin, brooding.

“What distinguishes you from your father?”

Her question, though asked gently, makes me shoot her a furious glare.

“We’re completely different.”

“In what way? From what I have managed to piece together, he only cared about money. How is that any different from the life you’ve been living?”

I can’t even look at Persephone, so I stare out the window as I reply.

“Da was a complete bastard. He embezzled, he lied, he cheated on Ma, he drank every chance he got, he—”

I stop, trying desperately to control my voice, which grows louder with every word. Taking a breath, I calm myself before resuming.

“He beat my brothers and myself bloody until we were old enough to leave the house. He was a terror to everyone that knew him, but he saved his worst punishments for those of us unfortunate enough to live with him. I would never—”

I stop again, steeling myself. I look back at Penny at last.

“I am nothing like him.”

She comes to me, drawn like a magnet to run her hand over my back in soothing little circles. Shuddering, I grit my teeth.

I hate her touch. Hate the fact that I need it. Hate that it feels like a balm to soothe my troubled soul. Hate the way that it puts another chink in my armor.

I stand stiff and still, staring blankly out the window. Just outside, rolling green hills and the blue-black ocean beckon. But I am hyper focused on how good it feels to have her caress my back.

Jaysus, but I have gone soft to my core.

She runs her hand over my back for a minute more before continuing to ask me questions.

“Do you think that your mother was unaffected by your father’s temper?”

I scoff. “No. If anything, she got it worse than anyone.”

Penny’s hand stops moving against my back. “Can I ask... if you know that, why are you so mad that she left?”

“Because I had to stay!” I growl. “She left and never even tried to come back.”

She is quiet for a moment. “Who told you that?”

Looking at Penny with a scowl, I gesticulate. “What do you mean, who? No one told me. I was there. I would’ve noticed.”

She pins me in place with a look.

“You were a little boy. Your father was in control. Your mother may have attempted contact any number of times without you being any the wiser.”

Picturing the mean old man who called himself my father, I can see him lying to me without remorse. God knows, my father did everything he single thing he could get away with.

Why not tell his sons that their mother had abandoned them?

“Hades.”

I turn, my fists clenched, my body ready for a fight. But Persephone just gives me a hint of a smile.

“It’s not easy to think of what could have happened in the past. Especially when you were too young to even know what was going on. I’m not saying that my suspicions are right. I’m just pointing out that there is obviously some kind of critical information that is missing here.”

“So what? Ma still chose not to take us. She didn’t contact us. She chose to start a new life here without us while we were still stuck in that hellhole. Is there really any way those facts can be interpreted differently?”

Her eyes narrow. “Context is everything. Besides, I feel like you’re repeating something that your dad told you guys when in reality, it may be untrue. I think your dad told you that in order to shift the blame from squarely on him to your mom. Since she wasn’t in the picture, she didn’t even get the chance to defend herself.”

I swear, for a second, all I hear is, it’s your fault, Hades.

“Of course you would say that! You women are all the same. My ma left because it’s what women do! They just leave and they don’t bother with goodbyes.” I am seething, lowering my voice to drive home my point. “Just wait. One day, you’ll leave too.”

Penny’s jaw drops. She puts her hand on my arm. “Is that what you think? That I’m just playing around? Look at me, Hades. Look at how freaking pregnant I am! I can’t just leave you without saying a word. Honestly.”

Looking away from her, I feel keyed up. “I think you would. If you get up the nerve, I think you would leave eventually.”

She’s quiet for a full minute.

“Look at me.” Penny turns my face towards her with a finger. “Does your work make you happy?”

“Does it... does it make me happy?!” I blurt out. “No, of course not. It makes me wealthy. It makes me powerful. It puts me on every government’s hit list. Happiness isn’t why I got into the business is the first place.”

She grabs me by the arms, pushing me until I square up to her, my mouth pressed in a grim line. Her hand trails down to rest on my chest.

“Can I tell you something?”

I grab her hand a little too hard and step up, so that her belly rests against me. “Can I stop you?”

Admittedly, I love her touch. I love the feeling of having her this close. It’s like a drug, luring me in. I lean closer, inhaling her delicate, innate scent.

She pushes me back half a step. “I need to know you’re listening.”

I grab her, pulling her against me. The inhale of her breath is sharp and quick. When I look deep in her eyes, bending her back in a dip, her pupils widen.

She feels drugged by my presence too.

Persephone starts speaking quickly, her breath coming fast. “When we first met, you scared me. I hated you. I didn’t feel like being around you was a safe haven for me. But now...” She tips her face up to mine, close enough to brush her lips against mine. She doesn’t though. She seems to be trying to make a point. “Now I think that we were meant to be together. Like the universe had a plan when it put me in your path.”

“Fuck, P,” I swear softly. I look deep into her eyes. “When you touch me like this... when you say these words to me... I know that you trust me...”

“With not just my life, but the life of our child,” she whispers.

Gritting my teeth, I scan her face. “I already know how I feel, which is that yer telling me the absolute truth. I’ve never felt that, not about anyone else.” I clasp her hand against my chest, moved by the sheer closeness of this moment. “I love the way ye touch me, Persephone. I haven’t been touched like this by anyone else in my entire life.” I hesitate before pushing forward. “I would do anything to feel you next to me forever.”

“You can have me forever,” she whispers, her eyes scanning my face. “All you have to do is ask.”

“What about my business?”

“What about it? It existed before you. I’m sure that your brothers will continue to run it after you’ve stepped back. You just have to make a decision. For once in your life, think about what would make you happy, rather than just considering what would add to your obscene piles of money.”

Without answering the question directly, I brush my mouth over hers. She sucks in a breath and I plunder her mouth, pulling gasps from low in her chest.

CHAPTER TWELVE

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PERSEPHONE

“I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” I whisper. I turn to him, sitting on the bed. All these emotions are flying around in the air surrounding me. I look up at him, my hand raising to caress his cheekbone.

His gaze locks on mine. I speak softly as I angle his head to just where I want it. “Make me feel anything else. I want to forget the past.”

I press my lips to Hades’ and his hands find my waist, roughly pushing me onto my back. I gasp and he plows one hand into my hair, pulling my head back.

His burning kisses scald the exposed curve of my neck as he moves down my body, ripping at my dress. He tears it open and I’m not wearing anything beneath.

My nipples pebble against the cool air as he shapes my breasts with both hands, pushing them together and sucking and biting them like a starving man sat down at a feast.

My back bows and I drive my hands through his dark, silky hair, pulling him closer. My mouth opens and I let out a moan as he abrades my nipples with his tongue. Then he moves back, and I’m left aching, wanting more.

Hades tugs at my dress. “Take this fucking thing off. I need to see ye. I want ye naked and writhing before me, begging me for my cock.”

I shimmy out of the dress as I watch him strip off his shirt and undo the buckle of his belt. Sitting up, I reach for him. But Hades pushes me back down, his eyes dark and excited.

“No. I want ye to touch yer tits. Play with them, pinch yer nipples.”

“Hades—” I start to whine.

He grabs my thigh and gives it a hard squeeze. “Do what I say, lass. Press yer breasts together.”

My heart starts pounding. I don’t know exactly what Hades intends, but I’m game to try anything. I pout a little as I bring my hands up to cup my breasts, covering them and then pushing them together.

His hand slips down to shape his cock in his slacks. I swallow and watch as he starts unzipping his pants. His eyes never leave my body, though.

“Play with yer nipples, Penny,” he demands. “Pretend it’s me touching ye. I want ye to think about me anytime ye get horny and decide to play with your tits and rub your clit.”

Sucking in my lower lip, I close my eyes halfway and do as he suggests, imagining Hades’ hands in the place of mine. I pinch my nipples and gasp as the sensation sends ripples down to my core.

“Tell me what ye feel,” he murmurs. I open my eyes in time to see him slipping his hand inside his slacks and fisting the length of his cock. “Are ye getting wet, lass?”

I press my thighs together and nod. “My clit aches. Are you going to...?”

I can’t bring myself to say what I want. But Hades seems to know exactly what I’m trying to say. He flashes me a dark smirk.

“Spread those long legs,” he says. “Let me see what I paid for.”

I eye him critically. “Is that what you’re calling it now?”

Hades loses patience. He grabs my thighs and shoves them apart. “Didn’t I tell ye to do as I say?”

I try to close my legs, but he moves so he is kneeling in between them. His body blocks my knees from moving. His hands force my thighs open once more.

I should rebel at this display of force. I should hate it.

But instead of going cold, I can feel my pussy getting wetter. I throw my head back, looking up at him haughtily. Before I even think about it, I open my mouth and issue Hades a challenge.

“Do something. I dare ye.”

He grabs my hands hard, his expression fiery. Then he forces my hands down between my legs. “Touch yer clit, lass. Do it, or I’ll turn ye over and spank ye so hard that ye won’t walk right for a week.”

I hiss at him, knowing that I’m baiting the bear. “You wouldn’t dare.”

In the span of a second, Hades snatches my arms and yanks me up, contorting my body until he has me face down over his lap with my ass sticking up in the air.

The first smack takes me entirely by surprise. I cry out when I feel his stinging handprint on the side of my ass. I think I expected him to pull his punches and not really spank me... but this hurts.

I open my mouth to protest when Hades delivers the second blow to my other ass cheek. "Ow!" I squeal.

"That's right," he growls. "Be still while I spank ye or I'll do it harder."

I squirm, trying to move away even though he just told me not to. The third spank stuns me and brings tears to my eyes. My face goes red; I didn't know that it would be so brutal.

Now I'm wishing that I hadn't been so rebellious.

Then he clamps his arm down across my lower back and I can feel his hand skimming over the imprints that he's made on my ass. I squeak but he holds me in place as his hand delves down between my ass cheeks and explores the folds of my pussy.

I let out a strangled, "Oh!"

"Relax," Hades tells me. His fingers probe my pussy and then slide up to find my clit. "Be a good girl."

But I don't know how to relax. All I can feel right now is my reddened ass and his clever fingers swirling around my clit. Within seconds, a strangled groan slips out of my throat. Hades' fingers move in quick circles and ripples of sensation spill out from my aching, throbbing clit. It's as if the brutality of the spanking amplified the pleasure that Hades is making me feel now.

"Ah!" I cry. "Hades..."

"That's right. Tell me how badly you want my cock. Want me filling that little pussy up, want me to stretch ye out."

I give a pleasured hiss. "I want it, Hades."

"Yeah?" He slips a finger into my swollen core. "Do ye?"

I shudder at the sensation of his finger slowly working in and out of my pussy.

"Hades..."

"Beg me to give ye my cock," he grits out. "Say pretty please and I just might fuck ye."

His fingers circle my clit again. I gasp, needing more from him.

“Please!” I say, tortured. “Hades, if you don’t fuck me—”

He shoves me off his lap and spreads my legs wide. I manage to my knees beneath me as he pushes his slacks down his legs. I’m not fully ready for the brutal way he grips my hips and enters me with a sharp thrust.

I make an inarticulate sound of discomfort as I adjust to his sheer size. Tears sting my eyes at the suddenness.

Is Hades too much for me to handle? Has my body forgotten so quickly?

As soon as I think that though, he starts moving, thrusting. “Rub your clit,” he commands me.

Then he starts moving faster, as quick and hard as a jackhammer. My eyes roll back in my head until I close them. I reach down between my thighs and touch my throbbing clit.

His rough thrusts. The way he grips my hips, knowing that his hands will leave marks on my delicate skin. And the sound of his voice as he growls orders at me...

I’m a ticking time bomb waiting to go off. Hades is saying all the right things, touching every part of me, filling me up with every stroke.

“I can feel yer pussy milking my cock. God damn, ye are so tight. So fucking hot.” He thrusts a few more times, his voice gone to gravel when he purrs. “Come for me, lass. Show me what a good girl ye can be. Come on my cock.”

I can feel the orgasm ripping through my body, starting at my clit and spreading out like wildfire. I clench my eyes, my body spasming as I try to ride out the wave.

For several seconds, I am somewhere beyond thought.

“Fuck, Penny!” Hades calls out. He moves with lightning speed, his voice wavering.

Then he stops thrusting, his body seizing. I can feel several hot lashes of his seed land as his cock twitches deep inside my pussy.

“Fuck,” he mutters, his grip on my hips easing. He runs his hands up the bare skin of my back for a few seconds before he withdraws. “Jaysus, Penny.”

I push myself up onto all fours, just getting up as he tucks his cock back in his pants.

His expression is one of dark amusement. “Let me get a towel for ye, lass. I made quite a mess.”

Blushing, I roll over and nod. Tingles still fill my body as he slips into the bathroom. I press my hands to my cheeks, unbelievably glad that we were intimate once again.

Running my hand over my stomach, I bite my lip and sigh.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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HADES

The next morning, I'm stroking Persephone's nude stomach. She is still lying beside me and drowsing. She did crack an eyelid and croak good morning to me before promptly resuming her doze, though.

Tracing my fingertips from her belly button up the stretch marks that now line her stomach, I purse my lips. Penny stirs, her eyelids lifting halfway.

"Gross, huh?" she asks. She wrinkles her nose. "As if I will ever forget that I bore a child..." She tsks. "The little priss gives me stretch marks."

"Ye won't hear me complaining about the marks." I drop a kiss on her bare belly, and she squirms. "It just means that my daughter was here."

"Hades!" She playfully bats me away. "I made a deal with my body. No more big physical changes that seem to happen overnight." She screws up her face. "So far, it doesn't seem to be listening to me at all."

She pulls a face, indicating her breasts. "These things were the first changes, but they just keep... growing! I feel like any minute, I'm going to blow a cork out of each of my nipples and milk come will shooting out."

I raise my brows. "Ye make that sound like a bad thing. I think it could be kind of sexy."

She hits me with a pillow as she cringes. "That's awful!"

"Ye can't get mad at me for thinking that you're sexy."

Penny cuts her eyes at me. "Yes, I can."

A knock sounds on the cabin's front door. Tensing, I turn toward the sound.

"Who knows we are here?" Penny asks, drawing on a robe.

I shake my head. “Can’t think of anyone.” Grimly, I peek out of the bedroom door. Because of the angles between here and the front door, I can’t see the person responsible for knocking. “Do me a favor. Get dressed just in case.”

She nods as I pull on slacks and a button up. While I’m stuffing my feet into my combat boots, the knock comes again.

“Hades? Persephone?” my mother’s voice calls out. “It’s Magda...”

As if there was a chance in the world that I wouldn’t recognize her voice. Hastily tucking in my shirt, I close the bedroom door behind me and hurry to yank the front door open.

My mother looks mildly surprised, tucking a loose strand of hair back. She’s holding a black leather medical bag and looking at me with a strange expression. Like she’s shocked but pleased to see me here, even though she knocked on my door and not the other way around.

“For fuck’s sake. Do you want to broadcast to the entire world just where we are?” Casting a glance around to make sure there is no one watching, I gesture for her to come in.

Magda enters and I am quick to close the door behind her. She fidgets, swallowing.

“Are ye hiding from someone in particular?”

Crossing my arms, I ignore her question.

“Is there a reason you are here, Magda?”

Penny pokes her head out of the bedroom, warmth lighting up her features when she sees Magda. She steps out, wearing a loose black caftan and nothing at all on her feet.

“Magda. So nice to see you.”

Magda clears her throat, her gaze sliding between us. “I came to follow up with Persephone. Ye know, make sure she was getting over her illness.”

Frowning, I narrow my gaze. “Seems like a paltry excuse at best.”

Penny intercedes immediately.

“Hush, Hades.” She goes over to Magda, taking her by the elbow and leading her to the couch. “Thank you for your concern. I’m feeling much better. Without medical intervention, I’m not sure I could say the same, though. So thanks for that as well.”

Magda inclines her head. “Of course. ‘Twas nothing.”

Penny darts a glance at me, licking her lips. Before she even opens her mouth, I have a feeling that she’s about to meddle.

“I think you two should talk. Hades seems to believe that he knows the truth about your... family situation. But I was thinking that you could shed some more light on it.”

I shoot Penny a look, letting her know just what I think about her meddling. As I open my mouth to tell her so, my mother lets out a stream of words at the same time.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“I would love to... talk.”

An awkward silence fills the air. I glare at Magda, already certain of just what she’ll say. Penny looks between us.

“Should I leave?” she asks.

“No,” Magda and I both insist at once. I drop onto the couch beside Penny, draping a casual hand around her shoulder.

Subtly reminding Magda that I am the one in charge here.

Magda clears her throat and purses her lips. Penny steers the conversation.

“Magda, you left Scotland because you were a victim of domestic violence. Is that right?”

Magda looks down at her hands, folding them neatly in her lap. “Not exactly. I didn’t want to leave, or I didn’t want to leave alone. I wanted to take my boys with me.” She pauses, seeming emotional. “Yer da wouldn’t let me. When I got pregnant again—”

“With Eros?” I interject.

She looks up at me, giving her head the smallest shake. “With Diana.”

I blink several times, trying to absorb that. “Diana?” I echo faintly.

Penny grabs my hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Let her tell you,” she chides.

Magda’s expression turns guilty. “When I found out that I was pregnant for the fourth time, I wanted to get rid of it. Yer Da constantly had something to harp about with me. He always found fault in what I did, even if it was as simple as staying in one place for too long. He beat me black and blue over the slightest upset. I... I couldn’t imagine having to tell him that I was pregnant again.”

Her face contorts. I can see her eyes glisten with unshed tears as she continues staring at her lap.

“You have to understand, Hades. I was just barely hanging on by a thread as it was. But before I could even figure out how to tell him that I

was in fact pregnant, your Da lost his mind over some upsetting news he received. It didn't even have to do with me. He found me, accused me of being unfaithful in our marriage. I didn't even know what to say. I was terrified of him."

She sucks in a shaky breath.

"He beat me so badly that time that I was sure I wouldn't survive. He broke my bones, bruised me everywhere that people wouldn't see. I couldn't even get out of bed for a few days after and that pissed him off even more. I'll spare ye the details, but let's just say that I thought that I would probably miscarry the child."

Penny leans away from me, reaching out a hand to comfort Magda. Magda startles at Penny's hand coming to cover hers, looking up at both of us. My heart wrenches when I see the amount of sorrow and pain in her eyes.

Caring for Penny has softened me, warmed my heart. I can no longer remain remote from this situation, as I like to think I could have only a few months ago.

Magda looks between us, entreating us.

"If I had stayed, he would have killed me. The next time he got angry enough, he would have. I felt it in my bones. I packed suitcases — a suitcase for myself and one for each of you. But when the time came to leave..."

I lean forward, not unmoved by her words. But still, I have quite a bit of anger and resentment built up inside.

"You left us," I accuse.

Magda gives me a pleading look, tears spilling down her face.

"Yer da told me that I had to choose. I could stay with the family and watch over you boys. Or I could leave with just the shirt on my back. He didn't even want me saying goodbye to ye."

"But you did say goodbye," I grit out. "I will never forget it as long as I live. It was the last time I saw or heard from the woman that claimed to be my mother."

Magda nods, dropping my gaze again and looking down at her lap. "Aye. It was a stroke of luck. One of your Da's friends dropped by just at that moment, and I used it as an excuse. Said I was going on a trip and would have to say goodbye right then. (Dad) glared at me, but his hands

were tied. If word got out that he was a domestic abuser, people would be much less likely to listen to whatever he wanted.”

At that, she breaks down in a mess of tears. Penny slips her arms around the older woman, murmuring comforting words.

“It’s all right. It’s okay, Magda.”

But I’m not done. “And what happened to Diana?”

Magda wipes at her face. “She lives here.”

“What?!”

Magda pales. “I would have thought Eros would have told you.”

Shock ripples through my body. For a second, I am speechless.

Persephone pulls back from Magda and bites her lip.

“You... you had a daughter?” she says, clutching at her chest.

“Aye.” She tilts her head, taking in our astonishment. “I’m guessing that ye didn’t know. Eros tells me about your life, Hades. Does he not tell ye about mine?”

“Absolutely not!” I thunder. Getting off the couch, I loom over Magda and Penny. “He’s a fucking dead man.”

Persephone stands up, pushing me back a step.

“Don’t crowd us. Be angry at your brother from a safe distance, please.”

I cross my arms, pacing away to the front window. “Both of my brothers have royally fucked up. How could Eros have had contact with you and a sister I didn’t know about? He didn’t say a word about either of you. And Ares is already on my shit for kidnapping Persephone.”

“It sounds like ye all have some things to work through.” Magda clears her throat.

My whole body aches with all the tension I’m carrying. I growl out a few words, feeling my blood boiling in my veins. “If by that you mean that I’m going to beat them until they are bloody, then sure.”

“Hades.” Magda’s tone is unexpected, one of censure. “Ye sound like yer Da.”

A chill runs through me at her words.

“I’m not like that bastard. And I think it’s funny that ye think ye can tell me anything about my life after being absent for so long.”

Penny, ever the peacemaker, intercedes.

“Hades, go easy on threatening your brothers.”

Magda gives me a hard look. “It amazes me that ye haven’t even asked to meet Diana yet. But if this is how you are with your siblings, maybe it’s

for the best.”

“Sorry, Ma,” I spit caustically. “I won’t be packed away into a simple little box for ye. Ye can’t just resume being my mother after all this time. All my personality traits are already set in stone.”

Penny shakes her head at me. “I feel like a crazy person when I’m trying to mediate anything between any of the Lyons. This conversation is going off the rails, just like all the rest. You are all so dramatic.” She peers at Magda. “For what it’s worth, I would love to meet Diana. Is she as much of a handful as the rest of them?”

Magda lifts a shoulder in a shrug. “Ye seem reasonable, Persephone. I would be glad for ye to meet her.”

I lean down, lacing up my boots. Penny and Magda both watch, waiting for me to say something. But I’ve had enough for right now. I stand up.

“Apparently I’m not allowed to threaten my own family in here. So I’m going for a long walk outside, alone.”

“Hades!” Penny says, exasperation ringing loud in her tone.

But I yank the front door open and stride out into the bright sunlight, walking toward the sea.

Both women cringe at my tone, faintly ducking their heads away from me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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PERSEPHONE

Huffing out a labored breath, I trudge down the shoreline. It's been a couple of days since Magda came to the cabin.

I keep expecting Hades to go out for a walk and come back with his sister in tow, ready to be introduced. And yet, he hasn't.

Instead, he just disappears for hours on end and has little to say about where he has been.

Hades has been gone for most of the day and now the sun is setting, surrounding me in a cascade of amber and gold rays. My entire right side aches and tingles, the nerves wired slightly wrong ever since the accident. The gentle, hilly grass I started walking on has now petered out, leaving me walking in sand the last little bit of my trip.

I clench my right hand, my eyes on the lone figure another hundred yards from me. Hades has found a large, blackened tree trunk that washed ashore as driftwood and made a seat of it.

Approaching him from the land, I can't see his face.

But I can predict his state without laying eyes on him. He's emotional and wrestling with just what that means for him.

Tucking my sweater duster more tightly around myself to ward off the cold, I continue down the beach. Hades turns his head just before I reach him. His eyebrows lift in faint surprise.

"Ye found me."

I take a seat next to him, shivering as a chilly current of ocean air hits me. Hades automatically begins unbuttoning his suit jacket to put it around me shoulders.

I slide him a look. "You're not freezing?"

He shrugs a shoulder. "I'm fine, lass."

I move closer to him, resting my body against him. He throws his arm around me and rests his hand on the swell of my belly.

"Have you heard anything more from Magda?" he asks idly.

Shaking my head, I blow out a breath. "From what I gather, she is pretty busy with the clinic."

There are several long moments of silence before he speaks again.

"The other day was a disaster. That was not what I thought that meeting my wayward mother would be like."

"No? What did you have in mind?"

He huffs a laugh. "I don't know. I imagined that there would be more hugging."

"Ah." I slip an arm around his waist, embracing him. "I'm sorry that it wasn't what you thought it would be."

"Magda really didn't apologize to me for abandoning us as children."

I tip my head back and look at Hades, shading my eyes against the setting sun.

"Is that what you were looking for? An apology?"

He shrugs. "I don't really know."

"What about meeting Diana? Don't you think that you should? Even if Magda wasn't quite what you thought, you have a sister that you haven't even met! If it were me, that would be my top priority."

Hades purses his lips for a second. "I've seen her."

"Diana?" I look at him, startled. "When?"

"Yesterday. I followed Magda home and I saw her. She's... she's pretty, like Ma was."

He scrunches up one side on his face, uncomfortable.

"Well... don't you want to talk to her?"

"I will." He frowns. "I just wish that my life weren't changing so rapidly all of the sudden. I only met you a few months ago."

I give him a funny look. "If you want to call seven a few, then sure."

"Right." He gives me a squeeze. "Then just as I... started to feel like maybe I needed you in my life, you were kidnapped. I was devastated. And the second I thought I would never see you again, you show up pregnant. I mean, that's already pretty fucking huge as far as life changes go."

I lean my head against his chest. "Maybe the universe is making up for lost time. No changes for years and then bam, a ton of stuff."

“Fuck. Is the universe who I should blame?”

“Maybe. At least the universe is only adding people to your world, not taking them away.”

“Aye, truth.” He squints out over the sea, watching as it laps at the shore. His shoulders hunch. “I feel like I’ve lost so much time with Diana. She’s a woman now, not a lass. It will be impossible to get that time back.” He makes an angry sound. “I could have had much more time with her if everyone in my family wasn’t so fucking secretive. Or if my mother had been more persistent about trying to contact us. It should be criminal.”

I tilt my head. “To be fair, I don’t know how long Eros has been in contact with your mother. It could be a new relationship.”

He stares pointedly out at the sea. “Does that really make a difference? I can’t help but feel like...”

He goes quiet for almost half a minute, then heaves a sigh. “It’s like I’ve been living a lie for years. And I don’t know who to be angriest with. Da. My ma. My brothers. How could I even begin solving a puzzle without all the pieces?”

I tug at his shirt until he turns toward me. Offering him a kiss, I am comforted when he presses his lips against mine. I shiver, feeling warmth spreading between our bodies. When I finally come up for air, I give him the gentlest smile.

“You’ve had an undeniably hard start to life.”

Hades schools his expression. “Aye. Not as bad as some, I expect.”

“My question is what you are going to do from here. With the knowledge you have right now and the people you now know are here...” I put my hand over his hand, which rests on my belly. “What will you do for your daughter to make her life better than yours?”

He looks down at my stomach, stroking it tenderly. When he answers, his voice is gruff and hard, the opposite of his light caress.

“Everything. I would do everything differently.”

My stomach growls suddenly and loudly, surprising us both. I wrinkle my nose.

“How about we talk about the ways you are going to change your life while we eat dinner? Ever since you ordered that locally made cheese in the groceries from the town store, all I’ve been able to think about is grilled cheese sandwiches.”

My mouth actually starts watering before I finish the sentence. Hades smirks at me.

“As you like, my queen.”

He bows and helps me to my feet, patiently walking beside me as I struggle back up the hills.

“You know, Ares called me something strange,” I puff as I maneuver myself up the path to our cabin. “He called me the queen of the damned.”

Hades seems amused. “I wouldn’t take anything Ares tells ye to heart. The one’s naught but a great snake.”

His accent makes it sound like gree-et snee-ak, which makes me giggle. “I have no idea what that even means but I love the way it sounds coming out of your mouth.”

Hades smirks again, his eyes lighting with carnal interest. “Maybe when we get inside, ye can show me more of what ye love.”

I wheeze a laugh. We crest the final hill, the cabin coming into sight.

Leaning against the cabin are Ares and Eros, looking like a perfectly mismatched pair of gloomy twins. Hades stops dead in his tracks, every single muscle in his body tensing.

“Fuck,” he says, sending me a nervous glance. “Lass, I’m going to need you to run to the neighboring cabin.”

Eros elbows Ares and they both stand up, Ares cracking his knuckles. I lick my lips, my heart beating wildly.

The front door of our little cabin swings open and Magda steps out, her face heavily lined and her expression weary. Behind her follows a younger version, a stunning brunette beauty that I assume to be Diana. She wears a simple blue dress and a white parka, but she looks absolutely regal as she steps out of the house.

“None of that,” Magda says, scolding Ares. “No fighting.”

Ares bares his teeth at her. “Who asked ye for yer permission?”

Magda scowls and puts her arm around Diana, moving away from him.

“That is not why I called ye here and ye know it,” she shouts to Eros. “Yer supposed to talk to each other.”

“I didn’t ask for this.” Hades spits on the ground. “But if ye want to make it so easy for me, I won’t say no.”

He puts up his fists, moving his legs into a fighting stance. His eyes catch on me and he jerks his head away from the cabin.

“Go on with ye, lass.”

“She will be fine with us,” Magda says, holding out her arm. “Come on. We may not be able to stop them from beating each other bloody, but we certainly don’t have to watch.”

I step toward her, hesitating. Hades is already stalking toward his brothers with a grim look on his face.

“Come on,” Diana says. She breaks loose from Magda and runs over to me, grabbing my hand.

Eros rolls his shoulders, his eyes on Hades. I let Diana pull me along, back down the hill. Magda falls in behind us as I glance back at the men. I can hear a grunt and a faint smacking sound, but we are soon out of their line of sight.

“So you’re Hades’ other half,” Diana says speculatively, looking me up and down. “You’re really pretty. Ma tried describing you, but I don’t think she did you justice.” Magda slips her arm around Diana’s waist. “As if anyone ever could.”

My brow draws down. “Thanks... but I’m a little confused. Have you actually met Hades?”

“Ugh.” Diana pulls a face. “Not yet. But Ma has shown me pictures and told me stories. We keep up to date with you guys from afar. Until recently, I thought that Hades knew about us and simply preferred it this way.”

“I thought the same,” Magda says.

“He definitely didn’t know about you. And that’s why he’s over there, thrashing Eros.” I scrunch up my face. “Ares is another matter.”

“Yes, Eros caught us up on the feud between them,” Diana says, tapping a finger against her lips. “It would make quite the story. I’m a junior reporter for the local paper and I’m always trying to find the latest scoop.”

She winks at me. Magda scans my face as we walk.

“Are ye feeling all right, Persephone? Ye look a bit pale.”

“Well...” I glance back toward the cabin, my hopes of a quiet dinner now smashed to smithereens. “I’m hungry.”

A loud yelp of pain makes Magda clutch at her chest. She shoots a dirty look over her shoulder and shakes her head.

“Come on, then. Let’s go to the clinic. I have plenty of provisions there. And I imagine that the boys will be along whenever their battle royale has played itself out.”

My stomach rumbles, telling me that it is a good idea to put food in it very, very soon. So I sigh and nod, allowing Diana and Magda to pull me

along.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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HADES

Eros is laying on the ground near the door of the cabin, barely conscious. He moans softly and rolls onto his side.

I smirk, tasting blood in my mouth. "That's for being a fucking snake," I tell him pointedly. "Yer just lucky that Persephone has already met you and would look poorly on me if I was to kill ye."

Ares rises from the ground, looking worse for the wear. His nose has been broken and blood trickles down in two streams, dripping onto his chin and his shirt. He's the most muscular but least agile, so Eros and I each got our chance to bash him. If we were on speaking terms, we'd have teamed up and trounced Ares easily.

But I think it's been far too long since Eros and I squared off against each other. Things between us were muddy.

Now they're as clear as crystal and he's on the ground, struggling to breathe.

I stand up with difficulty, wiping the blood from the cut over my left eye. Ares bares his teeth, raising his fists and circling me. I eye him, knowing that I won't have to bait him into throwing the first punch.

I'll just wait him out and taunt him a little. The rest will follow.

"What now?" I hiss, grinning like a maniac. "It's just me now, Ares. There are no more women for ye to kidnap."

He sneers, feinting a jab with his left hand. I dodge it easily, flowing around it like water around a fucking rock.

"Hades, Hades, Hades." He tsk. "I was just trying to maintain yer focus. It was only after I had kidnapped the girl that I realized that ye were just a boy, wrapped around her dainty little finger."

Making hard eye contact with Ares, I keep circling him. He sees that I am not swayed by his teasing words and he bucks at that.

“I could have killed Persephone when I had the chance,” he says, grinning. “Maybe I should have.”

The rage the fills my veins begins to boil. Still, I don’t swing.

His brows arch. “How can ye be sure that it’s not my babe she’s carrying?”

He feints again. I don’t even block it this time, I just move two steps ahead of where he had planned me to be.

“Ye wish. Not like ye could keep a girl for more than a day or two. Girls say that they are looking for a big, strapping barbarian... then they run away when they see ye.”

Ares scowls. “Fuck you!”

He swings at my jaw, the movement incredibly powerful. Without a doubt, if he had actually hit me, I would probably be out cold. But I am too quick, using his own momentum to push him down. He snarls at he falls and grabs my ankle, tripping me up.

I land like a thousand pounds of rock coming to rest against the cool earth. Ares tries to wrestle me, vying for the spot on top.

But I use the last of my strength to dominate him, rising up on his chest and punching him in the face.

“Fuck yer stupid twat of a girlfriend!” he manages. “All ye had to do was keep things as they should be—”

Eros lopes over to us, coming from somewhere out of sight and aiming a gun at us. I freeze up as he fires...

Only there is no explosion. Instead, four bolts stick into Ares’ skin. I scramble to get back just as Eros pulls the trigger. Ares seizes up and emits a yelp.

I look at Eros, puzzled. “Ye brought a taser?”

Eros shrugs and tosses the weapon to the ground. Ares grits his teeth and pulls at the bolts, flinging them away from himself.

“Fuck!”

Eros looks at me, pulling a face. “Are we cool?”

“Fuck off,” I bite out, irritated as all get out.

I struggle to my feet again, ignoring the hand that Eros offers. Ares is already getting up and dusting himself off.

“Fuck ye both,” he mutters. “I’m done with ye.”

He turns around and lumbers off in a random direction. Wiping away the blood from my eye again, I heave a sigh.

Eros winces and touches his jaw tenderly. “I think one of ye actually might have dislocated my jaw.”

Shaking my head at him, I slowly start heading toward the town’s center. Eros trails behind me, griping about how he’s hurt and why he originally came here.

“Ma called and said that ye wanted to talk,” he moans.

“Will ye shut up?”

“I knew it was too good to be true,” he continues on, as if I hadn’t spoken. “Should’ve followed my gut instinct.”

Eventually the clinic comes into view. Hurrying along, only now thinking that I’d left Penny unprotected, I jog the last fifty meters.

Busting into the clinic, I steel myself for something bad to have happened. I don’t know what, exactly. Only that I need to be ready.

But when I step in the door, I find Penny sitting on a stool and giggling. By her feet Diana kneels, pressing her ear to Penny’s stomach.

“Hello?” she says. “This is your Aunt Di...”

Eros shoulders me out of the way, entering the room. Penny looks up at me, her face falling when she sees the state of me.

“Hades!” she protests.

“I’m all right,” I say.

“So am I, not that anyone asked,” says Eros, his tone hurt.

Magda comes bustling out of the back hallway, holding a box of clean towels. She walks up to the two of us and holds it out.

“Here.”

I exchange a glance with Eros before picking up a towel and quickly rubbing it over my face. Magda looks at the two of us and then nods to herself.

She motions to Eros. “Right then. That head laceration looks nasty. Let’s get ye cleaned up first.”

I fold my towel over and glare at Eros as he heads to the back hallway, led by Magda. Dabbing at the cut over my eye, I wince. Penny hurries over to me, looking me over.

“Sit down, for chrissake.”

She draws up a chair and I ease into it, groaning very softly. I cast a glance over at Diana, who smiles sunnily and waves at me.

“Hello! Big fan. Ma’s told me all about you. Also I think I’m in love with your girlfriend.”

I can’t think of a single appropriate response, so I just mutter wordlessly.

“Look at me,” Penny says, taking the towel from me. “That cut will probably need stitches.”

Diana bounces to her feet. “I’ll go let Ma know that she should set up a suture tray for you.”

Penny touches a gash in my right forearm, and I suck in a breath. “Oooh.”

“Yeah. If it’s this bad right now, just think of the inflammation. You are going to feel so horrible for the next few days.”

Magda peeks out of the back room and beckons to me. “I’m ready for you now.”

Getting to my feet is a slow exercise. Penny shakes her head and follows me as I lumber back to the same small room we were in last time. I sink into the chair and Magda tutts, casting a glance at Penny.

“Would ye like a chair as well, dear?”

Penny flashes her a tight smile. “No thanks. I can stand. I may be pregnant, but I’m still months away from my due date. Actually, if it’s okay with you guys, I’m going to raid the refrigerator. It’s been at least an hour since I’ve eaten.”

She rolls her eyes, turning toward the door. Magda nods, briefly placing a hand on Persephone’s forearm as she heads out of the cramped exam room. Then my mother turns to me, sucking her teeth.

“Well, ye look a mess.” She starts cleaning my wounds from the top down, plying every cut with rubbing alcohol and iodine. “Eros looks worse. I don’t even want to think about how terrible Ares’ wounds are.”

I shrug a shoulder, wincing as she cleans the deep gash above my eye. “They came here looking for me. They’ve known me all their lives. Neither one could’ve expected my reaction to be any different.”

Magda gives me a long look, her eyes narrowing very slightly on my face.

“Well?” she asks.

“Well what?”

“Do ye feel any better now that ye’ve fought with your brothers and showed us all that ye are still the winner?”

I scowl at her. “What do ye mean, still the winner?”

“When ye were young, ye would fight just like that with Eros and Ares. Knock down, drag out, fight until someone cries uncle. What I saw today was no different.”

I snort, glancing at Penny.

“It was life or death. Ares fucking crossed a line when he abducted the woman carrying my baby. And Eros hid you and Diana from me. I don’t see how the situation could have been handled better.”

Magda tsks. “Yesterday, it was fighting over your favorite truck. Today, it was over your girlfriend.”

Gritting my teeth, I push myself to my feet.

“I don’t need this.” I swat her hand away. “I am not interested in being talked down to and made to feel insignificant.”

“Sit down,” Magda says, her tone strict. “I’m certainly not trying to make ye feel less than what ye are. I’m trying to put things into perspective for ye. Ye grew up, graduated to higher stakes, with bigger potential wins and losses. But what I am driving at is that yer brothers are just trying to compete with ye. Ye seem to have entered the next stage of yer life — one where ye find a life partner and build a family. It seems to me that this whole chain of events was just yer brothers reacting to ye meeting and falling in love with Persephone.”

I stiffen. “Who says I’m in love?”

She eyes me to see if I’m serious and then bleats a laugh.

“Absolutely anyone with even a single lick of common sense.”

“Based on what, exactly?”

“I’ve seen how ye act around her. Possessive, growly, protective. She’s carrying yer child. And most importantly, she seems to love ye in return. Even though yer... probably not the easiest man to have those feelings about.”

I glare at Magda. “Ye seem to think ye know an awful lot about us after knowing us for just a handful of days.”

“That’s because it’s obvious to everyone around ye. Especially yer brothers.”

“All right. That’s enough.”

“I don’t know if it is enough. Because yer response makes me think that ye’ve not told her how ye feel.”

I click my tongue. “Act, there you go, tell me how I feel again. See, that’s not really working for me.”

She waves a finger at me, fixing me with her gaze. “I’m going to tell you some hard truths, son. First, ye will have to forgive yer brothers eventually. They were just reacting to ye, following yer lead.”

“Did Eros put ye up to this?” I ask, my hackles rising.

My mother is unfazed. “Two, ye need to tell Persephone how ye feel. Do it today. Ye don’t realize it yet, but life is short and brutal. When ye have a person to share yer burdens and triumphs with, ye cling to that person and keep them as close as ye can for as long as ye can.”

Her eyes unexpectedly fill with tears as she wags her finger at me. “Tell her ye love her tonight.”

I frown at her, uncomfortable with her sincerity.

“Stop giving me advice.”

“Fine.” Magda shakes her head. “I’ll grab Diana and ask her to finish cleaning and suturing yer wounds. I have to go find Ares and convince him to come in and let me look at his wounds. But in the meantime, I hope ye’ll think about what I’ve told ye.”

I sit back down, staring at her stonily. She rolls her eyes at me as she heads out of the exam room.

But her words still ring clearly in my head.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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PERSEPHONE

Hades holds my hand as we wander lazily along the shore close to our cabin. It's been a couple days since the fight and as I predicted, he is splashed with black and blue bruises over nearly every inch of his body. He moves with extreme caution, keeping most of his grumbling to himself. From his stiff movements though, I know that he's hurting badly.

"Ow!" Pulling him to a stop, I put my hand over my stomach where my daughter just kicked me.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

In an instant, Hades is standing in front of me, touching my belly and glancing at me with worried.

I wave him off, wincing. "Nothing. The baby just decided to make her presence known, that's all."

"Ah." He frowns. "Nothing I can do about that, I guess."

I squint out over the sea. The wind has picked up today and the ocean churns, seeming turbulent than usual. I need to ask Hades about the future, about his plans for our little family.

After all, I need to plan some things myself. But I don't want to alarm him or throw our fragile peace into chaos.

"Can I ask you question that you probably won't want to answer?"

His lips twitch and he jerks his head toward the same piece of driftwood that we sat on before. "If yer going to interrogate me, let's at least sit down first."

Grabbing his hand again, I let him lead me to the piece of sturdy dead tree. We sit down, Hades closing his eyes as he does, masking his pain.

Why he is hiding it, I have no idea. I scrunch up my face, steeling myself for his reaction to my questions.

"I know that you haven't really had time to think it through yet. But I wanted to try to talk about what will happen when the baby comes."

Hades arches a brow. "Oh?"

"I am wondering where I'm going to live. Where your daughter and I will live. Have you thought about that yet?"

His expression is unreadable. "Just in passing. Why, where were you thinking?"

My heart starts beating fast.

"You're asking for my opinion? Usually you already have your mind made up on every single topic."

He shrugs a shoulder. "Maybe I'm trying to be different."

I think for a second. "I would be happy a lot of places. Here. Scotland. Paris... I just want somewhere that I call home. Ideally, I would like our daughter to have a really good place that she can grow up in. Stable, clean, peaceful. Not the kind of chaos that I grew up in."

I drum my fingers against my baby bump, tilting my head to peer at him. He starts nodding the second I emphasize the word peaceful.

"I have no idea where, but that sounds amazing to me. My early life was —" He interrupts himself, frowning. "I definitely learned what not to do from my own parents."

My heart tightens in my chest. "Most of all... I want to be with you. I know I'm not a brilliant inventor or a supermodel, but I could be..." I hiccup. "Faithful. I... care about you, Hades."

His gaze flits to me, his eyebrows raising in surprise. "I assumed that we would be together."

"You did?"

"Fuck." He shakes his head. "Magda was right."

I slide him a puzzled look. "About what?"

He slips his hand into mine, running his tongue over his top lip. His gaze catches mine, spearing me.

My heartbeat gallops in my chest so hard that I'm afraid it's going to run away. My lips are dry, my emotions seeming to fill my whole chest.

"How do ye feel about me, lass?" he husks.

"Me?"

"Yes. Tell me truthfully." His eyes bore into mine.

I swallow against the lump in my throat.

“I love—”

“Hades!” Ares yells, cutting me off mid-sentence.

I blink, swiveling my head around. Ares and Eros are stalking down from the grassy knoll just above, Ares looking fiercely determined.

I can’t help but clutch at Hades’ arm, wishing I were anywhere else but here. I don’t want to be the target of Ares’ focus, not for any reason.

Hades glances at me, correctly assesses my reaction, and stands up slowly. He moves so that he stands between me and his brothers, bristling.

Ares seems to not even notice me. That’s fine with me and I sit as still as possible in the shade of Hades’ tall frame.

“I thought ye had left,” Hades spits out.

Ares and Eros stop, Eros guardedly folding his arms across his chest. Ares has his arm in a sling but somehow, that doesn’t make me feel bad for him for a second.

“Hades,” Ares says stonily. “We might not like each other right now. But I have a proposition for you. One that will net you a good chunk of change and let the three of us break up the family business on amicable terms.” Hades turns back, checking on me. “Penny?”

My eyes widen. I’m physically shaking, I realize. “Y-yes?”

Hades beckons to me, slipping his arm around me and turning to face his brothers.

“Yer just in time.”

Eros scowls. “For what?”

Hades squeezes me. “I was working my way up to proposing marriage. So if you’d rather stick around and ruin that... I say, what the hell? Why not? You’ve already basically ruined everything else, why not this as well?”

My mouth drops. My eyes flit to Hades, trying to determine if he’s serious about proposing marriage. Who the hell pops the question without ever having said I love you?

I flush, but it doesn’t really matter. Hades is glaring at Ares, a sneer on his handsome face. Ares leans in close, glowering.

“Yer full of shit,” he accuses Hades.

Hades digs in his pocket, producing a light blue ring box. He cracks it open ever so slightly, showing that there is actually a ring inside. But before I can see it, he snaps it closed and returns it to his pocket.

I feel dizzy suddenly, lightheaded, as if I'm going to puke. Has Hades really put that much thought into a proposition? I can't wrap my head around it.

On one hand, I'm elated. Someone wants me, and only me, forever? It's enough to make my head spin.

But as soon as I think that I realize that I'll always wonder... did Hades just propose because I was carrying his baby?

Scrubbing a hand over my mouth, I barely keep track of the conversation as it flows around me.

"He's just asking ye a pretty simple question," Eros says.

Hades eyes them both. "Why would I do another job? We have plenty of cash from the Hungarians."

Eros rubs the back of his neck. Ares intentionally blanks his facial expression, making it neutral.

"Sort of. I made an investment," he says.

Hades looks to me, shrugging. "Heard that? He made an investment, he says."

"A friend came to me with an opportunity to sell a large quantity of (warheads) and diamonds. He needed money then and there, on the spot. Once in a lifetime opportunity. I made him a lowball offer. I was only happy to help him out of a jam but..."

Eros gets tired of Ares' storytelling. "Ares paid the guy nearly half of what we made from the Hungarians. And he has hidden the rest away somewhere."

"It's true," Ares says, jerking his thumb at Eros. "I did. You'll find that you only have a couple hundred thousand in any one bank account, just enough to keep the banks from notifying you two that funds were low."

An ugly look flashes across Hades' face.

"Are ye serious?"

Ares shrugs. "As serious as I can be."

Whipping out his phone, Hades scrolls for half a minute, checking on something. He glances up at Ares, his expression severe.

"Yer serious." Hades looks at me, his expression grim. "Ye do realize that ye just stole from me. From Persephone. From our unborn child. Ye get that point, right?"

"He says that he'll release the funds as soon as we are done with this final job," Eros chimes in.

Hades snaps back, “Shut the fuck up or I’ll fucking make you wish you were fucking dead.”

“Relax! Seriously, all yer money will be safe a sound, earning interest as it sits in a bank account somewhere.”

Hades tenses, his fist bunching. I can tell that he’s about to actually try to kill Ares, money be damned.

I touch his arm. His slitted gaze slides to me.

“Finishing the project you started on together doesn’t sound... so bad,” I tell him, keeping my voice quiet. “If they are willing to sign papers officially letting you out of this business, I would do it.”

His brow hunches. “Really?”

Ares folds his arms across his chest, sighing hugely. “Yer strategizing with yer woman? Jaysus, Hades. It’s a good thing this is going to be your last job.”

Hades never takes his gaze off of me. I just nod at him, letting him know that he should do it.

“Not for the money,” I whisper. “Do it because this is the last action you may ever see. And I want you to enjoy your last hurrah.”

What I don’t add is that I think he might need to do another job with his brothers, experience it all one last time while they are all together.

Hades grips my hand and looks back at Ares. He spits on the ground. “Fuck ye.”

“Is that a no?”

“It’s only a yes because Penny says to do it.”

I squeeze his hand. We stand like that for several seconds and then Ares gives a stiff nod. “All right. We’re agreed, then.”

“We should start planning right away,” Eros says. “I think I have a buyer lined up for some of the ammunition and small arms, but... (warheads) are a different story.”

“I have a plan,” Hades snaps. “How about ye both fuck off and leave us alone? I’ll call ye when I’m ready to follow the next step.”

Eros opens his mouth to protest but Ares grabs him by the shoulders and speaks for them both. “If we don’t hear from ye tomorrow morning, there will be hell to pay.”

Hades raises his middle finger, saluting his brother with it. His brothers stalk off, heading back up where they came from. He looks down at me, his gaze intense.

“Now, where were we?”

He slides his hand around to his pocket and I reach out my fingers, pausing his movement. He quirks his brow.

“Why are ye stopping me? I promise, I’m going to let ye say the magic words before I get down on one knee.”

I squeeze his fingers and draw his hand to my stomach. “One thing at a time. Okay? I was listening when you said you had too many big life changes. Let’s just... be together first, have our daughter second. And then, if you still feel like you want to propose, I’ll let you.” I suck in a breath. “I just don’t want you to marry me because you knocked me up.”

Hades gives me a look.

“I think ye know that once I’ve set my mind to something, I always get it. Yer no exception.”

“Even so. I am not ready to say yes. So do me the favor of not asking me.” I give him a sly look. “Well, not yet anyway.”

He frowns. “Before my brother interrupted, I thought you were going to say... how you felt.”

“I was.” I school my expression. “I do love you, Hades. I love your brain, and how you think four steps ahead of everyone else. I love how much bigger you are than me. I love how you protect me.” I pause, breathing out and touching my stomach. “And most of all, I love that you gave me a child. I... I didn’t think that I would...”

My breath catches and tears form in the corners of my eyes. The words are harder to push out now, so I do it quickly, almost jumbling words.

“I think a lot of people look at me and see a disposable person because I am disabled. But you? You make me forget about every nasty look ever directed my way.”

“Ach, lass,” he says. “I love ye, Persephone. I love yer fire, yer spirit. I love protecting ye and always looking out for ye. For our family. It’s part of a man’s job, if ye ask me. But more than anything, I’m astonished that ye picked *me*. No one has ever done that, not like ye did.”

“Oh, Hades,” I breathe.

He tips my chin up, kissing me deeply and passionately, without another single word said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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PERSEPHONE

Under Hades' dark gaze, I sink onto my knees. He steps closer to me, widening his stance, and tilts my chin up. He cups my cheek with rough, hot fingers and pushes his thumb in between my lips. When I open my mouth to accept, he is quick to dominate me, to jam his thumb against my tongue.

Making eye contact with Hades, I wind a hand around the back of his thigh and open my mouth more, accepting his rough touch. I imagine myself as a vessel for him, for his pleasure. That thought excites me as I suck on his thumb, using my tongue to explore it.

With his free hand, he unzips his slacks and shoves his pants down just enough for his cock to jut out proudly.

He pulls his thumb from my mouth, smearing my lips with the moisture from my tongue.

“Open yer mouth, lass,” he grits out. “Suck my cock.”

I lean forward hesitantly, my face flaming bright. He fists his cock and pushes the blunt tip against my lips. To my surprise the skin of his cock is like hot velvet. I open my mouth and explore the tip with my tongue, watching his face for a reaction.

The sound of a pleased growl rattling in Hades’ chest relaxes me somewhat. “That’s good. Just like that. Open yer mouth more... and mind yer teeth.”

I freeze for a second, unsure how to follow his commands. He takes control, pushing the back of my head down onto his cock. I curl my free hand around the base and use that as leverage, moving my head up and down gently.

The tangy, salty taste of him is new and intriguing. I bob my head a little faster and he digs his hands into my hair, controlling how fast and how deep I take his cock.

“Fuck.” He closes his eyes and blows out a breath. “Yer a natural, lass. I’m almost tempted to let ye go down on me all night.”

I bob my head, working up and down his shaft, watching his face the entire time. At length, he releases my head and gently pushes me off. I wipe my mouth, feeling unsteady.

Hades opens his eyes, his tawny gaze alight with lust. “That’s only a taste, lass. Now let’s see if yer as delicious as I remember.”

Pulling me to my feet, he spins me around and pushes me deeper into the room.

Hades grabs my hips from behind and threads his fingers into my hair. I shiver when he tilts my head to the side and places a heated kiss against the gentle bend of my neck. Hades whispers in my ear, something between an exciting purr and a frightening growl.

“Come,” he snaps. “I want ye on the bed, lass.”

The fake name I gave him rings hollow in my ears, but the deep sound of his voice makes me shiver with anticipation. I let him walk me over to the bed. His hands shape my breasts, his clever fingers pulling at my sensitive nipples, shaping them through the satin of my dress and bra. I gasp just as he pushes me down onto the bed, face first.

Hades’ hands brush the outside of my bare thighs. He’s the only man that’s ever touched me there before and it sends a fission of tense energy through my body.

I push myself up onto my elbows, heart pounding against my ribs, mouth open. Whether I’m planning on objecting or moaning I don’t exactly know. Hades grabs my thighs, forces them apart, and skims his hands up the insides of my knee.

I can’t help the squawk that bursts out of my mouth. Squirming, I try to clamp my legs shut. But Hades stops me by pulling my whole body down toward him. My thighs hit the wall of his legs and he moves to widen his stance.

“Lass,” he barks. “Quit fucking resisting. I’m bigger and stronger than ye are. If ye fight, I will win. Just relax and enjoy the way I make ye feel.”

I shut my mouth and glance back at him with wide, anxious eyes. Hades meets my gaze for just a second, his mahogany eyes ablaze with lust. There

is something darker, too... and that's what worries me.

He rucks up my dress around my hips and pulls down my panties, flinging them aside once he gets them off my legs. He steps away for a second then returns with a sleek black piece of plastic, just the size and curvature of his cupped palm.

Hades brandishes it, turning it on. It buzzes and he presses it against my ass cheek, showing me what it is for.

I blush as he strokes my inner thighs.

"I'm going to teach ye to come on command," he says, his voice low and urgent. "Be a good girl and pay attention."

My whole body tingles, my breasts tightening. When he places the vibrator directly against my clit, it's too much.

I cry out as the vibrator sends a wave of hard sensation through my clit, rippling out from my pussy to my taut nipples.

"Be still."

He holds it firmly against my pussy, bracing my hip with his free hand. I let my forehead drop forward onto the black silk comforter and let out a strangled moan.

It does feel good, but it is so intense that all my muscles tense up. I'm suddenly aware of my entire back being clenched.

Hades starts pushing my dress up again. I wriggle out of it and he unhooks my bra. My cheeks burn as I think of the way he sees me.

Before I can get worked up about it though, he turns up the vibrator. I am aware of how damp my pussy has grown; tendrils of moisture begin to slip from inside.

Almost as if he can read my mind, Hades slides the vibrator back, swirling it around my entrance.

"Yer getting so fucking wet for me, lass," he mutters. "Do ye know what that does to me?"

I look over my shoulder, biting my lip.

"No," I say, my voice a mere whisper. "What does it make you want to do to me, Hades?"

He shudders, his eyes gone pitch black, his growl reverberating through the air around us.

"You make me want to shove my cock into yer mouth, yer throat. Then I want to take yer pussy and fuck yer ass. I never want to stop, lass."

Lifting my hips to press harder against the vibrator, I groan. Hearing him talk is unbelievably arousing for me, especially knowing that he wants to fuck me so badly.

Somewhere in the back of my head, I hear the echo of a stray thought about how I'm supposed to be playing him, stringing him along. But I can't quite grasp it, not when he keeps pressing the vibrator against my clit.

I let my eyes closed, my hips moving back and forth just a little. When Hades suddenly pulls away and turns the vibrator off, I let out a frustrated whine.

“Hades...”

He moves away, flashing me a smirk as he reaches up to the wall for another toy. This time he grabs a smooth black rubber dildo that is skinny but long.

“Roll over,” he grits out. “I want to look ye in the eye when I put this in yer ass, lass. I want to stroke my cock and grab yer tits while I watch you come.”

My gaze snaps to the dildo, wide eyed. “I... I’m not sure...”

A heavy hand lands on my ass cheek, marking it without question. “I said roll over.”

My breath catches in my throat. My ass stings as I obey his command. He looks down at me, opening a bottle of lube, and starts to cover the little dildo.

“Move yer ass to the edge of the bed.” Hades’ eyes are hungry as he watches me comply. “Now put yer feet up on the edge. I want to see yer ass and yer pussy, lass.”

The position he guides me into is humiliating. But Hades doesn’t seem very patient at the moment, so I scramble to put my feet up on the bed. He looks down at me, casually leaning over to cup my face. Then he presses his thumb against my lips. When I open them, taking his thumb into my mouth and sucking it gently, he closes his eyes with a grunt.

“Yer making this hard, lass. So very hard. There are so many things I want to do to you... so many ways to fuck ye until ye wring the last drop of seed from deep inside my balls.”

I swallow tightly, not knowing what to say. So I just run my tongue around his thumb and suck on it some more, until he finally pulls away.

He opens his eyes, and they are filled with a dark promise. “Later,” he swears. “Right now, I want ye to use the little black vibrator on your clit.”

He leans down and picks it up, putting it in my hand. I fumble with it for a second, my breathing harsh, before I get it turned on.

Hades looks at me when I slide the vibrator down between my legs, finding my clit in an instant. My eyes drift closed for a half second.

“Look at me!” he growls. “Look at me while I fuck ye in the ass with this dildo. I want to see everything.”

I groan and fasten my gaze on his face. He unzips his pants and pushes them part the way down his thighs. His cock springs free, long and thick and heavy. As he strokes himself a few times, I can’t stop staring at his cock. My mouth starts watering as I try to imagine how his big fat cock would feel inside my pussy, stretching me out.

“Ye like what ye see?” he asks. He says it casually, like he doesn’t care whether I answer at all. But his eyes are locked on mine, his gaze threatening to consume me.

I nod, breathless, and press the little black vibrator tight against my clit.

“I can’t wait to fuck you, Hades,” I say, my voice breathy. “I swear. I didn’t know that you even existed before, but think I’ve been waiting for you.”

He gives a dark chuckle and then brandishes the dildo again. “Are you ready for me, princess?”

I look at the dildo, shiny with lube, and give a slow nod. “Yes,” I squeak out.

Hades keeps one hand on his cock and uses the other to guide the dildo to my rear entrance. Its tip pushes against the balloon knot and I tense up.

It feels so dirty and wrong, but my ass tingles, the nerve endings down there awakening. I flush red to the roots of my hair.

“Relax,” he says, biting his lip. “Press the vibe harder on yer clit, lass.”

I suck in a breath and do as I’m told, dropping down to my pussy to gather some moisture before increasing the pressure of the vibrator.

Hades watches me carefully as he works the dildo in and out, stretching my ass gently. “Fuck, lass. Ye make me so fucking hard.”

I groan, my hips beginning to thrust. The dildo finally pushes into my ass and glides in smoothly. I cry out, moving the vibrator faster.

Hades’ hand on his cock moves faster and harder, stroking it with something close to violence. I struggle to keep my eyes open, moaning, my hips moving in a more insistent rhythm now.

“Fuck, lass,” Hades grits out. He moves the dildo faster, fucking my ass with it. “Yer going to come, aren’t ye? I want to hear it. I want to watch ye fall apart.”

I should be embarrassed. I should feel some sense of shame. But with the stimulation on my clit and Hades fucking my ass with the dildo, it’s hard to worry about anything at all. It’s easy to forget that anything else exists but Hades and what he’s making me feel, how he’s fisting his cock, how I’m closer and closer to the edge...

“That’s it,” Hades says, his voice gone to gravel. “Come for me, lass. Do ye hear me? Come right now.”

All the sudden, every muscle in my body spasms at once. I can feel my pussy clench and relax, clench and relax. My eyes roll up in my head. Pleasure pours from my clit into my pussy and outward, a tidal wave of ecstasy. For several seconds, it goes on and on, feeling as if I am going to come forever.

When I slowly begin to drift back down, Hades is furiously beating off, staring right at my flushed face. Leaving the dildo in my ass, he starts thrusting against my hip and groaning. I open my mouth to say something, to ask what I can do, but he cuts me off with a whisper.

“Fuck, lass. I’m going to—”

He thrusts again and comes with a bellow, pulsing hot lashes of semen against my inner thigh. I lie still as he puts his hands on either side of me, his head sagging forward as he leans on the bed.

“Fuck,” he whispers. “God damn, that was hot.”

I swallow as his seed drips down my inner thigh, dribbling onto the bed. “Good?” I ask, suddenly able to worry again.

Hades straightens, fixing me with his tawny gaze. “Oh yes, lass. It was very, very good.”

Relief floods my veins. “Oh. Well... I liked it too.” I laugh. “As if you were somehow confused.”

A strange look passes over Hades’ face. Humor, yes. But also regret.

Is it already time for regrets?

He leans down, kissing me, and pulls the dildo out of my ass. My cheeks burn as our tongues meet. He kisses me deeply, passionately.

If it were anyone else, I would swear this kiss was romantic.

“I love fucking ye, Penny. I just can’t get enough.”

I pull him close and kiss him, thinking those four magic, forbidden words.

I love you, Hades.

But I'm not brave enough to say them. Soon he presses his already-hardening cock against my thigh and all other thoughts are forgotten.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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HADES

The four of us sit at a café table on a busy Paris street. Ares has a newspaper, but he surreptitiously scans the faces of every single person that passes our table. Eros shuffles a deck of cards as he looks around, fanning and folding the deck over and over again.

I scribble notes about our upcoming job into a tablet, scowling at the other patrons until the tables around us begin to clear out.

And Penny?

Her lips are clamped together, her cup of tea long since gone cold. She stares at the gold-plated bullet that I placed in the middle of the table, unable to concentrate on much else. The bullet is inscribed in a cursive scrawl.

It says *Hades*.

I set my tablet aside and look at Penny. She reaches for the folded piece of stationary sitting next to the letter. She reads the contents again, although I am sure that she knows them by heart by now. They are exceedingly simple.

We know that you've raped dear, sweet Persephone.

We know that she carries your child.

She belongs in New Orleans, untouched and childless.

This can only be rectified with bloodshed.

Choose who you will protect.

You've been warned.

— Constantine, Benjamin, and Marcia

“Where did you find the bullet?” Eros asks, shuffling the deck.

“I found it with the note in my luggage when we arrived at the hotel. The thing is, I looked for something in my bag after we got off the plane here in Paris. So it must’ve been slipped into my bag sometime after that.”

He looks at Ares, who is still silent. He reaches out and edges the paper aside a few inches, arching a brow.

“What do you think? Is the threat viable?”

Ares gives a half shrug. “If they could get close enough to put it in Persephone’s luggage, why wouldn’t they just take her?”

“Good question,” I say, my gaze lingering on a suspicious-looking man who leans casually against a wall opposite the café.

My alarm bells are sensitive as fuck right now and right now, they are ringing at the way the man is casually scanning our seating area. But in the next moment, the man pushes off the wall and says something to a man who approaches him. The two take off, strolling, and I let out a breath I didn’t know I had been holding.

“Maybe they couldn’t grab me,” Penny says. “Maybe the bullet was a part of their backup plan.”

“The whole thing is pretty fucked up,” Eros says, his gaze sliding around the street corner.

“Penny.” I reach over and pluck the letter from her hands, folding it and sticking it in the inside pocket of my jacket. “I’m sorry, but I think we should keep you inside while we are in Paris. I know the weather is pleasant, but this letter makes your family’s intentions clear.”

She clenches and unclenches her hands. She looks at me, dry eyed, but more puzzled than anything else.

“I don’t understand,” she whispers. “My parents don’t act as a unit. And they definitely don’t keep track of my movements. How do they even know I am not hiding out somewhere in small town Louisiana?”

Taking her hand, I pull it into my lap. “Constantine.”

She looks horrified. “You think he has something to do with this?”

“It’s too much of a coincidence for your parents to have the ability to suddenly track you down. If they have the information, it was supplied to them by Constantine.”

“God. It’s like that part of my past just won’t be outrun, no matter how hard or how fast I move in the opposite direction.” Her mouth contorts.

Ares folds his paper and sets it down.

“The way I see it, this just adds some additional time sensitivity to our mission. Once we complete the mission, yer free to vanish from sight altogether.”

“Ares, you are not helping anything.” Eros lets out a silent sigh. “He is right, though. Disappearing would be my first priority.”

I tilt my head. “Yes. I wonder if Constantine knows that we would think that?”

Penny stretches her hands across her stomach. “What?”

“I don’t know,” I say, leaning forward and putting my elbows on the table. “It’s just a feeling. Is there a reason that Constantine would have to scare us off of selling these warheads? I would think that he would want us to quit.”

“Ares, give us more details about the job,” Eros says.

Ares looks around and leans in, dropping his voice.

“The warheads in question are part of a remote, air-launched ballistic missile system. They are explosively formed penetrators. I’ll save you the time and just tell you that these missiles and warheads are capable of massive destruction. As a matter of fact, they were the property of the US Army at some point.”

“And you want to just give these things to the highest bidder?” Penny asks. Her condescension is evident.

Eros is quick to jump in. “No. There are several groups that we will not give such large weapons to. Russia. The Saudis. North Korea. Just to name a few places.”

Pushing out my tongue with my cheek, I nod.

“Who is our potential buyer?”

Ares screws his face up. “Nassar Abuladan.”

A huff of surprised laughter escapes me. “I thought he was dead!”

“Who is this guy?” Penny asks.

“A slimy British ex-pat who is usually the chosen go-between for Oman or the U.A.E.,” Eros says. “He’s... not a good guy.”

“To be clear, none of the people we sell to are good guys,” Ares adds.

“True. If we were too picky about who we sold to, we wouldn’t make many sales.”

“I’m just glad that Hades will be out of that underworld after this sale.” Penny purses her lips. “I expect that you’ll need some documents forged?”

“A set of customs papers, at the very least. And if you could forge one of the lesser-known pieces by Matisse or Renaud, it would help to ease our way. Oman especially is always looking for art to pass on to...” Ares pauses. “Whoever the fuck is dumb enough to do business directly with them, I guess.”

“So you just need a painting by one of the masters copied down to the last detail?” Penny asks drily. She purses her lips and flashes a sour expression. “You’re lucky that I really need this sale to go through.”

“It’ll benefit us all,” Ares rumbles.

“If that were true, ye wouldn’t have had to blackmail me into going along with your plan,” I retort.

He pushes back his chair and gets up, his lip curling. “Just do yer part, Hades. And make sure that yer girl does the same.”

I stand up, giving him a hard glare.

“Don’t tell me what needs to be done, Ares. I got us into the whole arms-smuggling world in the first place. Ye have me to thank for every single dollar we’ve racked up since.”

Eros looks over at Penny. He shrugs at her and remains seated, putting the cards down and folding his hands.

“This job should be quick, maybe two weeks max. So let’s just get it done and then we can fight over our petty bullshit after, if that’s what we still feel like.”

Extending my hand to Penny, I help her to her feet. I’m furious at Ares and to a lesser extend Eros. But I still have Persephone to watch out for. Her safety is the most important thing. Leaning over the table, I scoop up the bullet, brandishing it.

“The hotel where we are staying may be compromised. If our enemies were able to get a bullet into Penny’s suitcase, we have no assurances that she will be safe inside.”

She shivers. “What if the note was hidden in my luggage before the hotel? Or what if the person who planted it wants to drive us from the public eye?”

“That’s a fair question.” I slip my arm around her, squeezing her tightly.
“Do we want to contract security?” Eros asks, standing up at last.

“Already done.” Ares looks at his phone. “I hired some Serbian mercenaries. As long as we have money, they are on our side. And they should be touching down here soon.”

“I also have some place for you to stay that I think will suit our needs,” Eros says. He scrunches up his face. “Let me check it out, but I think it will be perfect for our little artist to work.”

Persephone gives him a dirty look. Smirking at Eros, I shrug. “Let me know.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

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PERSEPHONE

In the early morning hours, Paris is just beginning to wake up. Dawn stains the darkness of the receding night sky with cool, gray blots of ink that slowly spread across the horizon. Against the early morning gloom, I hurry down the street after Hades. My eyes are wide, soaking every fiber of my soul with the sights and sounds of Paris.

I can't believe I'm here.

The first bus of the day whooshes past on the dark, rain-slicked street. A short, scruffy young man sets up a display of flowers at his corner stall. The smells of freshly baked bread and fish straight from the ocean rise to greet my nose.

Before me, all I can make out of Hades is his heavy black wool overcoat. His booted feet fall heavily as he strides down the Paris sidewalk. How strange it must be to walk with such certainty.

Hades turns, glowering at me over his shoulder. "Ach, lass. Dinnae fall so far behind."

I release a tiny sigh as I pick up my pace.

"How are you not in complete awe on this city?"

At my words, his footsteps slow. He peers at me as though only now seeing me properly after all this time.

"You've not been to Paris?"

Heat suffuses my cheeks and I shove my hands into the pocket of my overcoat, much the same as his. It doesn't fit me at all but it's only temporary, just until we get to wherever we are going.

I answer his question with a shake of my head. He grunts and his expression darkens for a moment. I assume that he has to be adding the fact

to the towering stack of truths he has gleaned from me since he laid eyes on me.

He turns a corner, looking over his shoulder and putting his arm around me. Hades keeps pushing me forward, hurrying me. But I refuse to rush on my first morning in Paris. “Don’t you find it a little thrilling that we are here?”

I don’t have to look at him to know that he is rolling his eyes at my question. “No. I find it inconvenient.”

“Still! It’s freaking Paris, Hades. We are breathing in rarefied air here.”

“There is the same smog here as everywhere else. The same traffic and hectic rush you would find in any city. It’s just harder to tell here because they trick you with baked goods for sale every few feet.”

I stick my tongue out at him. “Even though we are in a rougher part of town and not anywhere as touristy as the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre, surely we can appreciate a good croissant du fromage. What’s the harm?”

Hades slides me a look. “It must be nice to live in your world, Penny. In my world, it is always better to keep moving. Not to waste time dawdling and eating cheese-filled delicacies. That’s how people get killed in my world, Penny.”

My brows rise. “They stop to eat?”

He frowns, casting his gaze around the empty street. “People that slow down, take time to smell the roses... people stupid enough to fall in love? In my line of work, those idiots are the first ones to get their throats cut.”

A knot forms in my throat. I swallow and try to read his expression. But there is nothing to see there just now. He just looks as though he is stating a fact of life.

I open my mouth to fire something back. Or maybe to ask him how long he plans on selling weapons. It’s on the tip of my tongue, at any rate.

But he comes to a stop, pulling me closer to a seemingly abandoned warehouse. As I watch, biting my lower lip, he presses a discreet button.

Hades jerks his chin upward, indicating that I should look up. When I do, I see a sleek camera, painted a dusty gray to blend in with the building.

There’s a loud mechanical buzzing sound that makes me startle. Hades pulls the door open wide, waving me in.

I step into a blindingly white hallway. There is not a speck of dust or dirt, nothing to see aside from a set of elegant white stairs. The hustle and

bustle of the gray Paris street I just left behind is gone as soon as Hades closes the door behind us.

Gone too is the sound. Everything is muted and quiet here.

“Is this purgatory?” I quip, nervously rubbing my hands together.

“Clever,” he says drolly. “Come on.”

He leads the way up three flights of elegant white stairs. As we get to the top, the stairs open up into a large Paris warehouse that has been converted into a loft. It’s all one main space, the bedroom and the living room only separated from the kitchen by twenty or so feet. There are gorgeous windows everywhere I look, with their leaded panes still intact. Someone has gone to a ton of trouble to add an expensive-looking kitchen and a chic, white-likened boho bedroom. I can see that this loft has a little balcony with just enough room for a polished metal table and two white-cushioned seats.

Everything is white marble and gleaming platinum, creamy off-white shag textures and unfinished concrete walls.

“Whoa.” I look around, taking in all the muted luxury with a mouth only slightly ajar. “This is not what I was expecting at all. Somebody put a lot of time and money into building this place.”

Hades takes off his bulky overcoat, throwing it carelessly over a white couch near the bed. “It’s a loan from a friend of a friend.”

“Well, that friend is loaded.” I shrug out of my own coat, folding it up and leaving it on the kitchen island.

“Want to see your studio?”

My heartbeat kicks up. “There’s a studio?”

Hades flashes me a tiny smirk and then heads over to the wall. He looks around for only a second before he finds a set of buttons and mashes them.

Pocket doors materialize from the white blankness of the wall, opening automatically. I walk through, my eyes adjusting to the dim lighting. Hades is right behind me, hitting the lights.

The room’s windows look down on a large white marble drafting table. On it are piled the forging supplies I remember quite well.

I turn around, gesturing to the supplies. “Is this my stuff?”

His mouth twitches. “Most of it. Some of it had to be replaced. But all your work was saved.”

I walk over to one of the stack of cardboard boxes standing taller than me. On my tiptoes, I peer in the top box. Sure enough, there is the crate of

inks, just as I left them. Swishing a finger over it, I exhale a tremulous breath.

“I can’t believe that you were able to get it out,” I murmur.

“You would be amazed at what you can do with enough money in northern Africa.” He leans against the doorframe, crossing his arms. “Then again, maybe you wouldn’t be so surprised anymore.”

My brows knit. I close the box’s lid and then turn toward him. “No. I guess once I’ve been abducted on a continent, it’s hard to see past that.”

I meant to make a joke of it. But it comes out breathy and weak. Hades is quick to straighten himself, walking over and tugging my hand, leading me back toward the kitchen.

“Come. We could both use a drink.”

A bark of laughter escapes me. “It’s barely sunrise, Hades.”

He releases my hand with a shrug. I close my fingers in a fist, feeling strangely lonely without his simple touch.

“Coffee, then,” he says. He points to a polished platinum stool pulled up to the kitchen island. “Sit.”

Smiling a little at how bossy he is, I take my seat. He rummages through the neatly organized white marble cabinets, pulling out everything he can conceivably make coffee with. Once he has a pour over set up and the coffee ground, he fills a gleaming silver kettle and sets it on the stove to boil.

I look at all the mugs and various coffee making implements he’s pulled out and left sitting on the counter. My lips twitch.

“Now the spoiled child in you emerges,” I tease him. “You just assume that someone else will put all those things away.”

Hades eyes me, his expression both defiant and challenging. He picks up a mug, walks over to the discreet white trash can, and drops it into the container with a thunk.

“Is that better?”

My lips lift. “I think you know very well that it’s not.”

He lifts a shoulder in a cool, jovial shrug. Silence reigns as he makes coffee. My mind wanders, going back to how nice this loft is and how much time and money someone must have spent on it.

I wonder if I will ever have a studio like this. My mother had a nice studio. For years she asked my father to rent her a space of her own, free from the obligations of her two needy children.

And my father had the money to do it.

I cock my head to the side, looking at Hades out of the corner of my eye. Hades is rich. So rich, in fact, that he puts my father to shame. In fact I think in many ways, my dad would approve of Hades.

Am I living my mother's life? Repeating her same mistakes? I can clearly, vividly imagine what staying with Hades could be like.

I would come in from the studio, a dried paint smudge across my cheek, my hair in a messy bun. Hades would be on the couch, reading something with characteristic intensity. I would sneak up on him, surprising him with a kiss on the forehead.

And then he would grunt, pulling me down onto his lap...

"Do you want cream?"

I blink. "What?"

Hades waves a coffee cup. "Where have ye gone, Penny?"

My cheeks color. "Ah. Yes, cream is great."

He pours cream in the coffee, eyeing me while he works.

"Ye had a faraway look," he comments.

"Just..." I shrug, my blush deepening. "Daydreaming, I guess."

He brings the coffee over to me, setting a mug down in front of me. I lean in, inhaling the fragrant brew.

"What are you daydreaming about, then?"

I shake my head, unwilling to meet his eyes. Instead, I pick up the mug and take the tiniest sip of the strong, hot coffee.

"Is it a sex thing?" he asks, a note of amusement in his voice.

Shaking my head again, I shoot him a look. "I was just wondering what it could be like if we were still together in say... two years' time."

Hades sets down his mug of coffee forcefully, causing it to splash over the side. I startle, my eyes widening as I look at him.

"Just do your fucking work, Persephone. I got you everything you need. So make me some god damn forgeries. Get us out of this mess we're in."

"Hades!" I squeak.

"I mean it." He comes around the kitchen island, towering over me. He lifts my chin, peering into my eyes. "It won't do you any good to think beyond tomorrow."

I swallow convulsively. "You're going to let me go tomorrow?"

"No. I'm saying that making plans is.... it's useless."

I bring my hand up, wrapping it gently around his hand, moving it so that he cups my cheek. “That’s a funny thing to say coming from the man who has plans, backup plans, and contingencies after that.”

He scans my face, his eyes hard. “You’ll leave me, Penny. One way or another, you’ll leave. No matter what I do.”

“You don’t know that,” I say softly.

Hades moves his hand, wrapping his fingers around my throat. He moves closer, turning my body and standing between my knees.

“Yes, I do.”

He squeezes his fingers, clenching them around my throat. But after a moment, he lets go and steps back. There is a look of profound disappointment with a note of disgust on his face. He sneers.

“Do your work, lass. I’ll be back in a few days.”

And with that, he heads to pick up his coat from where he dropped it.

“Hades!” I shoot to my feet. “Wait a second!”

But he is already making his way through the door, pulling his coat on as he slams the door behind him.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

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HADES

I'm in a strange mood for the next couple of days. Most of the time I spend staring out the panes of glass that line the walls of the loft. Penny is trying her best to recreate a lesser known Manet painting, a still life with fruit.

I have too much time on my hands. Usually I have my phone buzzing with calls and texts. But now protecting Penny is my primary focus. I while away the hours, glowering down at the figures of people that cross the busy street below.

I see an older couple walk by, arm in arm, seeming comfortable with each other. If they speak, I do not see it; instead, they seem as comfortable with silence as they are with each other.

Witnessing that makes me tense somehow. How is it exactly that the man isn't looking around, trying to gauge whether anyone means them harm? And the woman seems lost in thought... a perfect target for any kind of crime from a purse snatching to a kidnapping.

And yet they merely part ways, kissing each other quickly and then walking opposite paths until they are both out of view. It's only when I can't see them anymore that I release a huge breath that I didn't realize I had been holding in.

That level of comfort that I just witnessed was dangerous. It begs for someone, someone with terrible intentions, to step in and ruin the whole moment. A simple blast of automatic gunfire or a speeding car, used as a weapon...

That couple would be on the ground, their lives forfeit.

I can't ever let Penny get close enough for our dynamic to be so easy. Without the relentless tension of keeping an eye on our surroundings, I have

the suspicion that my manner with Penny would become more familiar, less guarded.

I can't let that happen.

She may have my heart, but I have to put space between us.

Space could very well keep her alive.

A crash sounds in the next room, startling me from my brooding thoughts. I get up off of the couch and move toward the art studio, searching for the source of the sound.

Pushing the gap in the door open, I find Penny kneeling on the floor, picking up large shards of glass from where they now lie in a shattered mess. She tosses her hair over her shoulder, her mouth pulling down.

“What happened?”

“A couple bottles of vintage paint fell. That’s all. I’ve got it,” she says, not bothering to hide her irritation.

“Come on,” I say. “It’s time for us to go do literally anything else. You need a break.”

She looks up at me, tossing her hair over her shoulder, annoyed. “Like I can take a break right now. I have so much to do in so little time.”

I walk over to her and bend down, grabbing her firmly by the arms and forcing her to her feet. She looks distraught and shoves her hands through her hair.

“What a mess,” she mutters.

I look around at the spilled paint on the floor and shrug. “We’ll get to it later. I promise. Right now, I want to take you somewhere.”

Penny looks at me suspiciously. “Where?”

I give her a tiny smirk. “You’ll have to wait and see, won’t you?”

She wrinkles her nose. “I really despise that answer.”

Still, she heads out of the room and into the bathroom. Ten minutes of grooming later, Penny presents herself again. She has changed into a dark silk dress with a full skirt. I had a shop assistant pick out clothes for her in my colors, black and white. They look elegant on her as she pulls on a light jacket. Her raven hair is piled on top of her head. Already, she looks calmer.

“Today, we’re going to be incognito.” I produce heavy dark sunglasses and two stylish hats. I let her pick and after she dons hers, I put mine on as well.

Giving her an appraising glance, I grin wolfishly. “You look good enough to eat.”

Penny cuts her eyes at me but the flush in her cheeks says that she appreciated my comment. I escort her out of the apartment, down the stairs, and out onto the street.

Spread out around the street corner are a number of our security team members. A woman pushing a stroller, a man stretching in his running outfit, an older guy talking loudly into his cellphone. I don't say anything to them, but I notice as they begin following us at a distance.

Penny is none the wiser, which is as it should be.

She looks up into the bright sky, shading her eyes, and a little smile appears on her lips.

"Wow," she says. "I had no idea that it was so nice today. I guess I just got really wrapped up in forging that painting."

I offer her my arm and cock a brow. "Come on. I have a place in mind. I called ahead for us."

Her brows draw down in puzzlement. "A reservation? You're taking me to a restaurant?"

I pull her down the street, giving her a teasing glance. "You'll have to wait and see, won't you?"

Knowing Paris as I do, I am able to give her a somewhat meandering tour of the city. We leave the quarter we are in and head to the heart of the city, where all the great cathedrals, the Sacré Coeur, and the Eiffel Tower are.

Penny is all wide eyed as I take her by the Arc de Triomphe and the Sacré Coeur cathedral. Notre Dame is just down the street, but I want to be on time. So I decide to play tourist later and had for our final destination, a place that I know that Penny will enjoy more than anyone I can think of.

When we get to the building, it's obvious enough where we're going. Two blocks long, made of gray marble and a stately blue gabled roof, it is quite majestic in its own right. I look at Penny, raising a brow. "Have you been here before?"

She shakes her head. Penny looks up at it, her gaze trying to decipher what this magnificent building is. She read the words to herself, silently sounding out the letters in French.

"Musée d'Orsay?" she says at last. "Oh. Oh, my god."

I assume that she knows what this museum is. It's the premier exhibition of impressionist art in the whole city. And it so happens that I am owed a favor from the museum director, Rene DuBois.

Persephone's eyes widen. She looks at me, slapping my arm lightly and mouthing her surprise. "You brought me *here*?"

I nod, smirking. "Not just that. I got us a private tour. They have closed the whole museum just for us. That is, assuming that we hurry."

"Ohmigod," Penny repeats, seeming dazed.

Checking my watch, I realize that we're very nearly late.

"Fuck. I promised we would be on time."

We rush up the steps to meet the tour guide, who is waiting at the entrance for us. She is a black woman in her mid-fifties, wearing a light blue uniform that indicates her status as a docent.

"Bonjour," the tour guide says. Very matter-of-fact, no-nonsense. She nods at both of us. "*Je suis Julia*. I am Julia. I am going to give you a private tour today."

She switches from French to English incredibly fluently and I can see why she was assigned to give us the tour. She is likely the best at her job, which makes me feel that the museum director did in fact come through on his promise.

I make a note to scratch his name out from the long list of people that owe me.

As soon as we step inside, Penny digs her fingers into my arm and looks around, completely in awe. I can't help but feel the same as she does looking at the many tons of steel that make up the rib cage of the building. All around it are stretched thin pieces of glass, allowing light to stream down from above in a beautiful pattern. Lower down, heavy pieces of marble form the walls. The building itself is a thing of true beauty, almost on par with the art we came here to see.

I've been here before of course, but I play the quiet visitor, accompanying Penny as our guide shows us around.

"This is the museum's clock," Julia says. She points up at a huge gold clock that is set in the wall. She proceeds to talk about how the clock was put in and why it is a sign of incredible luxury to have such a large time piece.

"You see, it was in 1908 that they built this entire building for the World Exposition. It was the height of fashion and technology at the time. Much like we have fashion week now, the city hosted the World Exposition then. The whole world showed up to marvel at our great works."

Persephone nods, mesmerized. She never lets go of my arm as we walk, a fact that I have to admit I like. Being her guiding light and her protector, all in one. That's something that she not only brings out in me, but also a role she allows me to fill for her.

Julia coaxes us onward, through several Renoir and Degas-filled rooms. Lots of ballerinas and water lilies. Honestly, it's not to my taste, but it's clear enough that Penny is soaking up every moment.

She even asks Julia several questions about the artists' painting process, impressing even Julia.

"No, I am not sure whether Renoir used crushed beetles to make his paint red. I will ask for you before you leave, though." The look on Julia's face is one of slight surprise. I doubt if she gets very many true artists here.

In total, we spend almost two hours browsing through the museum's many rooms. Penny even revisits a few of the galleries, gazing at some of her more favorite works.

"It's incredible," she mutters. "I mean, you can see the brushstrokes so clearly this close up." She waves a hand across the artwork she is talking about, from one side to the other. "You can tell so much more about the light and the movement seeing them in person. This is... It's honestly crazy that I have never been here."

I put my arm around her, feeling like I've won a prize. My heart squeezes.

She looks up at me with wide, innocent eyes. "Thank you, Hades. Thank you for knowing just where to bring me. This is so inspiring."

"Of course," I say, as if it was nothing.

As if I didn't have to threaten to expose Rene's gambling habit to his family in order to get this little tour. My lips curve upward at the corners. "We only have the museum to ourselves for another half an hour. I was thinking that we would go to the little café that they have upstairs and sit outside on the terrace. How Parisian is that?"

Her eyes fill with tears. I frown, thinking that I've done something wrong.

"What is it?"

"It's just... wonderful. That's all. It all just seems so..."

She lets go of my hand and does a whirl, letting her skirt fly out wide. She makes a couple of turns around the wooden floor, grinning and looking happier than I can ever remember.

I admit, I feel good, knowing that I have shown her something new and wonderful to her. Will it always be this easy with Persephone?

“So? You approve?” I ask.

She laughed forever. “Of course I do. Thank you again for bringing me here. I can’t get enough. I would probably never leave if the staff didn’t make me.”

Offering her my arm, I wink. “Come on. Let’s go feed the baby. Besides, you haven’t lived until you’ve seen the café patio here...”

She takes my arm, and we leave the echoing gallery, talking a little too loudly about Penny’s favorite things she’s seen today.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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PERSEPHONE

Making a face, I pull back from the painting and study it. It's a simple still life, just oranges and apples on a silver tray. It's supposedly one of Manet's lesser known it works. Pressing my lips, I tilt my head.

I'm done, or nearly done anyway. The work I've chosen is not a knock off exactly so much as it is a work that never truly existed. It's one of a series of a still life that and then they did, but he never did quite so many copies.

Backing up a few feet, I move side to side, making sure that my work is impeccable and above questioning. I have to say, I love working in this particular style and although the entire job stressed me out as much as possible, I'm pretty pleased with the results.

Putting my brushes down, I slipped off my work apron and hang it on the back of a chair. The stack of forged documents is on the table beside me, the ink dried and ready to be utilized.

Stepping away from the workspace, I am finally able to breathe easily. Everything that I set out to accomplish has been done. We won't need to hide out here much longer. I moved towards the door to the studio.

From the light, I would guess it is early afternoon. Hades and I have a doctor's appointment today that I absolutely can't miss. I hurry through a quick wash of my face and hands, reading myself at the last traces of my hard work.

When I come out of the bedroom, I hear Haiti is raised voice, Speaking somewhere far off. I raise a brow and tiptoe toward his voice.

Sucking in a breath, I listen outside the apartment door. I know that I shouldn't be listening in on anything that Hades doesn't want me to hear.

But I can't help it. He has been so tense and jumpy today that I'm practically going crazy.

They blew up a car not far from here, he whispers into his phone. I don't believe that bullshit the news is circulating about Islamic terrorists. A car bombing within two blocks of my location is a coincidence, and I don't believe in coincidences.

My heart starts hammering. I lean close to the three inch gap, trying to see him through it. He stands on the topmost stare, his posture indicating anger. He points his finger when he speaks, so obviously the other person can't see him.

"We're supposed to go for a visit to see her obstetrician today. So double the security team and lock down any kind of public transport that ye can." He listens for a moment. "Do it now. We're leaving at any moment."

I barely have time to back away from the door before he whirls, hanging up the phone and heading back into the apartment. I manage to backtrack to the kitchen and look at him with wide eyes when he comes stocking in.

"Why aren't ye ready?" he asks.

I looked down at my outfit, blushing. "I am. Or at least, I think I am."

Hades glances at my feet pointedly. "Ye need shoes. And a jacket. And the sunglasses and hat from the other day. I want to take all the precautions necessary to ensure that no one recognizes us."

Blowing out a breath, I head over to where I ditched my shoes in the living room. It's the work of a moment to slip into them and grab my jacket, sunglasses, and hat. I whirl around, presenting myself for inspection.

"Yes?" I prompt.

Hades sighs, his gaze flitting over to the door. His mouth turns down at the corners and he swallows. God, he looks so tense.

"Are we sure that ye have to go to the doctor? Why can't the doctor come to us?"

I give him a puzzled frown. "We talked about this already. There is sensitive medical equipment that can't be moved that is in the doctor's office. I don't know about you, but I sure would like to see our daughter and make sure she is growing sufficiently."

He sighs again, this time silently. "As ye will, lass."

"Is there something I should know about? A specific threat?"

His eyes tighten on me for a split second. Then he just shakes his head. "No. There's nothing to worry about. I just want to keep ye safe."

I can't say that I appreciate him lying to me. But maybe there is more to the situation than I can understand.

I hurry into my coat and let him usher me out the door.

When I hurry down the stairs, I see a big black SUV waiting at the curb. Hades steers me over to the car and a slide in the backseat, feeling my apprehension growing. There are two dark suited men in dark sunglasses in the front seat and I smiled tensely at them as hideous climbs in the car beside me. Neither man says a word to me but hideous commands them as he shuts the door.

"Go," he shouts.

He looks at me as we pull out of the parking space. "Seatbelt, please."

I pull at my seatbelt, securing myself. Hades looks around, his eyes roaming the street. He starts a little as I touch his hand, clasping it with mine.

When his gaze swings around to me, I try to be reassuring.

"It's going to be fine. You've got everything as under control as it can be. Okay?"

He nods but his gaze flits out, never settling on any one place for too long. I clear my throat and squeeze his hand. But I can't help feeling like I have to be on high alert as well. The mood in the car is pretty tense and I am not so dense as to be blissfully unaware.

"What are you hoping to see today?" I ask.

Hades looks at me, frowning a little. "I'm sorry?"

I raise my eyebrows at him.

"At the appointment?" I prompt. "Are you excited to see the baby today?"

From his expression, it's evident that he hasn't even considered that yet.

"You mean we can actually see her?"

I roll my eyes at him. "Well yeah. That's the entire point of going to the doctor's office. They have medical equipment, like sonographs."

Before he can say anything though, one of the men in the front calls attention to a car behind us. The man in the passenger seat looks back and nods his head.

"Hey boss," he says. "I think we're being followed."

Hades' head snaps around to look out the back window. His hawk like gaze zeros in on the white SUV just behind us. He straightens and shakes

his head.

"If they are intending to follow us, they are not being very subtle. Which means that we should be prepared for anything. Speed up, lose them if you can."

As soon as he says it, the security guard presses on the gas pedal and the entire vehicle lurches forward. I can feel the sheer velocity that we're traveling at all the way down into my bones.

My heart thumps in my chest but honestly there are so many things going on that I can't even pay attention to it right now. Putting my hands over my stomach protectively, I swallow. My input isn't really asked for in this space. All that's required of me is being as quiet as possible and staying somewhat calm.

Hades is really leading the charge here, trying to figure out if the white SUV is really following us.

The driver does a quick right turn, which has me clenching at the hand rest with evident terror. The white SUV makes the same last-minute decision that we did, squealing its tires as it follows us down the street.

He does use murmurs a curse under his breath. "Fuck. They are definitely following us."

"What do you want me to do?" the driver asks.

"Evasive maneuvers. Do whatever you have to do in order to lose them. The last thing that we want right now is a confrontation. Not while Penny is in the car."

I whip my head around, staring at the white SUV that is right on our tail. The windshield is tinted, but I can still make out two figures behind the glass.

I feel my heart speed up as I try to decide if I recognize them. I could be wrong obviously, but it looks to me like Constantine and my father, Ben.

"Hades," I say, pointing at the car. "Could that be a Constantine?"

He looks again and his gaze tightens. He nods tightly. "It could be. It looks like him, but I can't be sure."

I lick my lips nervously. I feel flushed, feverish almost.

"The other man could be my father."

Hades starts, looking back. "Fuck," he says. "Can we go faster?"

"I'll try, sir."

What on earth is my father doing here? I know that my mother and father liked Constantine even after I told them about some of the abuse

allegations. That was honestly the beginning of the end of my relationship with my family. But to be here and Paris, in the company of the man that has already tried to kill me once?

That's a whole new low for my father. What can he possibly hope to gain from being here right now?

I'm already carrying Hades' child. The fact has obviously not escaped Constantine. From the threatening letter in my luggage, my parents knew it too.

So again, I have to ask myself: what could they hope the outcome would be?

I honestly can't imagine, and the fact makes me sick.

Hades slides over in the car, sitting next to me. He puts his arm on my belly, shielding me as well as possible. I grip his hands and stare straight ahead, trying to figure out what the game plan could be.

I don't see any possibility of a confrontation with Constantine and my dad that doesn't end with one of them trying to drag me back to Louisiana. I look up at Hades, my thoughts snarling.

"It's going to be okay," he says. He looks at me, his eyes pinning me in place. "Ye know that, right? No matter what, we are going to be together."

I nod slowly. "I want to say I'm not afraid but..." I trail off.

Hades nods. As he begins to speak again, the whole car suddenly lurches forward, rammed by the white vehicle right behind us. I let out a strangled gasp as I'm thrown forward, bracing myself on the seat in front of me.

Hades growls low in his throat. He feels dangerous just now, like he cannot be contained. His eyes flash with fury and I shiver, even knowing that that emotion is reserved for our enemies.

He is a fearsome man.

The driver of our car floors it and we are pressed back against the leather seats as he takes a while left turn. The white SUV makes the same turn as we do, pulling up so that we are side-by-side. The traffic flowing against us veers wildly out of the way but the madman behind the wheel of the other SUV doesn't slow or stop. It merely swerves all over the place in its' attempts to pull even with us.

Our driver slams on the brakes and we skid sideways. My eyes go wide, and I clench at Hades' hand. For a second, my body doesn't know which direction it's even being flung in. Soon the driver throws the car into

reverse and slams on the gas, looking backward as he navigates down the street. I hear Hades murmuring under his breath.

But what is he supposed to do? I don't know.

A second later, two cars pull out into the middle of the street, blocking us and denying us access to escape. The white SUV has reversed its path as well and it traces our path exactly.

When we come to a screeching halt, it does too. As soon as the SUV slows down enough, the doors fly open, and Constantine gets out. There's a grin on his face, ugly as sin. He lifts glasses from his eyes and brandishes his huge firearm.

He carefully and neatly shoots the two security guards several times, somehow avoiding me and Hades. The bullets hit the car in a bright, loud burst.

I duck, hanging on for my life and praying that Hades has a plan.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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HADES

As our car skids to a halt, my pulse throbs in my neck. That's all I can hear for a moment as the armed security guards sitting in front of us begin to open their car doors. One of them seems to be in better condition than the other, climbing out of the passenger seat and raising his sleek black gun to fire at Constantine.

He's standing behind his open door but Constantine glances over at him and casually fires his own weapon back. Though the shot seems impossible, it hits the guard in the chest, and he goes down hard.

I mutter a curse out loud and pull my weapon out, assessing the situation. Getting Penny to safety is going to be my primary concern right now. But the security guards have both opened their doors, so there is no longer a barrier in place between Constantine and us.

No, it's better if I try to draw them away from the car and have Penny run for it when she can. Locking my jaw, I look at her, the expression on my face stony.

"Yer going to have to run for it."

She looks at me, grabbing at my hand wildly.

"What?" she breathes.

I start sliding over toward the door that faces outward toward the other SUV. She clings to me, but I grab her hands and look her in the eyes, scanning her face. I see fear and grief written there, two emotions that I had hoped to never see on her face again.

"I am going to draw Constantine out. While I do that, I need ye to run. As far and as fast as ye can possibly go. Do not stop for anyone, no matter who they are. You are not safe until I come find ye. Do ye understand?"

She looks at me, terror in her eyes. When she tosses her hair and lifts her chin in rebellion, I see the sheen of tears in her eyes.

“You can’t really think that I would abandon you.”

I reach for the door latch, pressing my hand on it. This is the hardest thing that I ever have to do but I stare her down.

“This is not about ye and me anymore. We have to think about the baby. And I need more than anything to know that ye and the baby are okay. So ye had better run if ye know what’s good for ye.”

Penny looks a little shocked. She opens her mouth to say something else, but I open my door and pile out of the car, slamming it behind me.

Instantly I am greeted with a hail of bullets. I can’t even tell where they’re coming from or who exactly is shooting at me. I duck behind the opened driver’s side door and wait for a break in the gunfire.

I hear Penny open the back seat as I pop my head up, firing off a couple of shots. My aim is not to make actually hit anything. Rather, it is only to distract Constantine by making as much noise as possible. I fire several shots directly into the broad side of their vehicle, blowing out the windows. Constantine and Penny’s father duck their heads down.

I lower myself and glance back, but I find an empty backseat. Penny has gone, running to safety.

My heart clenches in my chest. Constantine fires a shot that hits the door only inches from my head. I flinch away from the sound, feeling the bullets impact as it travels through the door. I pop my clip out and reload it, riding myself for another volley of gunfire.

Constantine shouts out from behind the white SUV where he is sheltering.

“If I take you, Hades, I’ll take Persephone too. I don’t just want one of you. I want to grind you into the ground and let you die knowing that you’ll never get to meet it.”

My whole body tenses. He’s trying to get a rise out of me of course, but I have to say that he’s doing a pretty good job. Gritting my teeth, I try to think of what I should do next. I need to keep drawing him away from wherever Penny fled to, so I start looking at the building to my immediate left. It’s a tall marble building with stone columns and I stare at it like an idiot.

Think, Hades. What would your training tell you to do?

The security guard that fell beside the passenger door rouses and I can see him beginning to move. He is obviously in pain, but he gets onto his knees, sheltering behind the door. I glance over at him and he makes a gesture to his suit jacket, pulling it aside to flash a bullet proof vest.

I'll give him a thumbs up and a questioning look and he nods tightly. I point toward the building, making a motion of crossing the open space. I point to him and mimic him laying down fire.

He nods tightly, his expression contorting with pain.

Good man. I will be sure to make his efforts worth it if I ever get out of here.

I hold up my hand and look at him, asking silently for five counts. He nods and turns toward Constantine's car. I notice that there has been no noise from the other side for almost a full minute and I wonder if I should be concerned about that. But my brain doesn't allow me to worry about it for a long period of time.

I am laser focused on what is right in front of me.

Quickly, my gaze flits over to the building that I am about to run to. As soon as the security guard fires the first shot, I start to move.

Ducking down to avoid any gun fire, I sprint to the column. Just as I reach it, there's a spatter of gunfire that bursts through the pillar, missing me by the slightest inch.

I feel a stinging pain in my right bicep and realize that the bullets have sheared away a bit of the marble façade and now it is buried in my flesh. I don't even give it another thought, though.

All I can think of is Penny. How far she could have run by now?

Gauging that, I slide around the back of the pillar and look out, trying to see where she has gone. The street runs down a way before emptying out into a dead end.

Fuck.

I wonder just where she might be. Hopefully she is made it off the block and is currently running as far from here as possible.

"Come out!" Constantine calls, pulling at my attention. "Tell your man to put his gun down. Slide your gun out to and I will be quick about shooting both of you through the head. Don't make me wait too long though because I will lose patience."

I hear the other security guard yell a faint curse back at Constantine.

"Where did Constantine go? Where is Penny's father, for god's sake?"

Teeth clench, I lean my hand out and show the tip of my gun to the waiting man. It's the oldest trick in the book, basically to find out where your enemy might be at.

I expect immediate gun fire but instead I get nothing, no reaction.

What could that possibly mean?

I wait, my pulse racing. It's far too quiet out here.

A spray of gunfire a few seconds later fells the security guard once more. Whether he is actually dead or not I cannot tell, but he's not moving around or making noise of any kind.

Wiping perspiration from my brow, I glance out at the scene. Again, it seems deserted, as if no one were waiting for me.

I fire valley of shots into the side of the white SUV again, this time aiming for the rear tire. It isn't until a few seconds later that I hear a faint girlish scream that curdles my blood.

Penny.

Tensing, I get ready to run in the direction of her scream. But I can't see her, I can't make heads or tail of where she is.

Constantine finally makes himself known by slithering out of a building across the street, a malicious grin on his face.

"You heard that? Yes. Her father got her."

I duck behind the column but shout back. "And does her father know what ye intend to do with the baby? Does he know that yer a fucking psychopath?"

A chuckle is that the only response I hear.

"Fuck it." I swing out, gun held straight out, aiming at the place where Constantine should be. But a second to late, a blurry shape moves just outside my scope of vision.

I turn, finding that Constantine is just behind me. He bleats out a laugh and his bald head shines in the Parisian sunlight.

He aims at me, just a hair more slowly than I draw on him. His reflexes are questionable and that's his downfall.

I shoot him a straight through one eye, yelling as I do.

He flinches in surprise and then falls over, toppled like a bag of flour. His head makes a sickeningly dull thud as it hits the ground.

I'll turn around, looking desperately for Penny, but she is nowhere to be seen. Likewise, her father is also absent.

I start running toward the direction that I heard her scream, wishing like hell I knew where she was.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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PERSEPHONE

When the car finally comes to a stop, I jerk awake. For a second, I am totally disoriented. I can't place where I am and why it's so dark.

My mouth tingles and tastes faintly of chemicals. I lift my tongue as I try to focus my eyes. My arms and legs can barely move, and I'm bound at the wrists and ankles.

I squint into the darkness. It feels a bit as though I am struggling to move through a sticky glue-like substance.

"Get her out of the trunk." A man's voice cuts through my daze.

Like a light switch being flipped, I remember everything. I suddenly know exactly where I am and what has happened to me.

I remember the rough hands that shoved me into the trunk of this car. The cold gleam of the barrel of the gun that was pointed at me while I struggled; the glint of the syringe as my captor brandished it; the sound of my panicked breathing and the sharp pain as the man jabbed it in my arm.

I remember screaming and thrashing until I was hoarse, until the rough carpet beneath my body rubbed angry welts into the exposed skin at my wrists and ankles. My arms grew heavy, and then my head, and then the entire world slid away. my head dully thudding. The loose black caftan I wear has twisted around my thighs and bunched under my shoulder blades. I can hear my captor rustling around in the car.

Think, Persephone! Move! Get ready to surprise the man somehow, with something. I wrinkle my face, bringing my bound hands up to press at my temple.

If only my thoughts came a bit easier. Right now, they come in clumps, all backing up on each other, getting snarled and tangled.

What was I just thinking I needed to do?

The car door opens, and I begin to tremble. I know this all too well now. I brace myself for the same set of rough hands to pull me from the trunk.

Whipping my head around, I try to think of where the opening to the trunk should be. I need to attack, I need to get free somehow... Sweeping my bound hands around the perimeter of the trunk, I hope like hell that my kidnappers have been stupid enough to leave a tire iron or... I don't know, maybe a pencil?

Anything that I can wield against them.

But my captors have been too smart for that.

Shit. I suppose my next best option is to pretend I'm still unconscious, then. I try to stop the trembling in my hands and the rapid rise and fall of my chest.

Stillness may be my savior today.

When the trunk is flung open, I crack my eyelids just a little. Enough to see, but not enough to seem aware. Pitch black night sky is the first thing I see. Without moving my head, I try to scan the horizon. All I can make out is a large light gray building... an airplane hangar, maybe.

My captor steps into view and I lay eyes the same figure dressed in head to toe black tactical gear. A shiver of fear races down my spine but I try my best to repress it.

When he reaches in the trunk for me, I play dead. I keep my eyes closed as I let him pull my limp form from the trunk without so much as a whimper. His clammy hands grip me as he tosses me over his shoulder as casually as a sack of flour.

Inside, I'm seething at his audacity. But I keep pretending that I am still knocked out so that I can take in my surroundings and maybe hatch a plan for escape.

That all ends pretty abruptly when I catch a snippet of passing instruction. "Take her over to Constantine."

In an instant, I go hot and cold all over. My mind races and I lift my head, hoping to see what we are approaching. The man who's holding me is in blocking most of my view and if I wriggle too much, he'll know that I'm awake. I can't hear over the surge of blood pounding in my temples. Around the man's thick black form, I can just make out an airplane hangar.

My thoughts run riot, my mind flooded with fear. I know I have to get away. There is no way I can just let this stranger carry me straight to my ex-

boyfriend turned enemy.

Planning seems important but my mind can't hold onto any kind of scheme for more than a couple of seconds. So I do the only thing that makes sense inside my snarled tangle of a brain.

All at once, without warning, I stiffen my muscles and throw myself to the side. The stranger who is holding me fumbles and stops as I slide off toward the ground.

But in my drug-addled state, I don't prepare for what comes next. Namely that I will crash to the ground, my knees and elbows taking the brunt of my fall to the pavement. I feel a sharp, burning pain ranting from my knees on impact.

For a split second, I know a note of sheer agony.

As I land with a thud, I tense up my body to begin scrambling away. But my bound wrists and ankles stop me from moving with any kind of speed.

In less than five seconds, the man who carried me turns around, growls down at me, and grabs me by the back of my hair. "Quit wasting my time."

Adrenaline pumps through my veins as I scrabble on my hands and knees, desperate to flee. But the man wrenches my hair painfully, pulling me back toward him. My eyes water and my vision blurs; the man picks me up again, wrapping a thick arm around my waist and forcing me toward the hangar.

My blood curdles as I realize that Constantine is standing right there, not two hundred feet away. He leans against the doorway of the hangar, a dirty little smirk on his lips. His blonde hair is slicked back from his face and he's wearing what I think of as his uniform: a white button up, dark jeans, and those same damned red alligator skinned boots. He's a pretty boy, cocky about his good looks, and his self-assuredness practically radiates off him.

I struggle and fight against the man holding me, scratching and kicking. But the whole time, I can't take my eyes off of Constantine. My hand tingles painfully, reminding me of the last time I turned my back on him.

Even as his goon hauls me toward him, I've learned better than to look away. It's only half a minute before the man dumps me unceremoniously in a pile mere feet from Constantine.

I look up at him, shaking, trying to shrink back. All I can see when I look at Constantine is the slowly-spreading pool of (friend's) blood, being washed away by the lapping waves.

His smirk deepens. He steps forward, strutting toward me, a toothpick clenched in his teeth.

“Persephone,” Constantine declares softly, spreading his hands out in the air before him. “I’ve been looking for you, baby girl.”

I shake my head, the motion jerky, almost involuntary. There isn’t anything for me to say. My whole body trembles violently when he gets close enough to reach out, grabbing my chin.

“Let’s have a look at you.” His fingers grip my face hard enough when he pulls at me that I’m sure that there will be bruises. He gives my face a shake. “Look at me!”

I do, my eyes wide, my nostrils flared. I stare into his handsome, tanned face and his pretty brown eyes. There is a cunningness and a malevolence to his expression that makes a shudder ripple down my back.

He sneers. “I heard the craziest rumor. You won’t believe it.” He crouches down so he’s closer to me, but he never eases his grip on my chin. “I heard that you had gotten a little of that... what’s it called? Stockholm syndrome?” He glances behind himself, but there is no one there. When he turns back to me, he gives me a conspiratorial wink. “You know what that means, don’t you baby girl? It means you have been moaning and spreading your legs for that bastard.”

I tear up when his fingers dig into my face like talons. Drawing in a breath, I let out a squeak of pain. Constantine releases my face, but I don’t even have the time to feel relief. He grabs my throat with one hand, looking me in the eyes and clenching his teeth.

He squeezes his fist hard, and my bound hands come up, scrabbling at his wrist.

“Constantine—” I choke out.

He gives me a handshake. “Shut the fuck up. You’re damaged goods. You know that? And I’m not going to fall for your shit this time around. You’re going to be still and quiet, or I’ll turn you out and make you a whore faster than you can say I’m sorry.”

His fingers grip my trachea and for a second, I think he might cut off my air right here and now. I close my eyes as tears escape down my face, trickling down my face freely.

Just when I see little red spots dance across my field of v vision, Constantine lets go and steps back. I am not ready to support my weight and so I fall onto my hands again, gasping for breath.

Constantine tilts his head to the side, pursing his lips. “If I find out that you fucked Hades, baby girl, you’ll wish I had killed you. I promise you that. Now get on the fuckin’ plane.”

With that announcement, he turns and struts toward the waiting plane. I stay put, dragging in breaths, watching him as he strides up the set of stairs and disappears into the small private plane.

Behind me, my captor has returned. “Get the fuck up,” he orders. “We have a long flight to Gulf Shores.”

His words rain down on me like physical blows. I rear my head back, as if I can somehow escape their meaning.

I haven’t seen the town of Gulf Shores since a jogger found me there on the beach, bleeding and half-dead. Constantine left me there in the sand to die and walked away scot free.

It’s the last place on earth I would want to go.

“Gulf Shores?” The words sound hollow as I repeat them. “Why would we go there?”

The sparkle in his eyes is unmistakable. “Because it’s the last place anyone will think to look for you, honey.” He smirks. “I don’t plan on making your stay very comfortable. After you made us run all over the world hunting you down, the boss needs to see you on your knees, begging him to take you out of hell.”

My mouth falls open. I want to argue, to fight with him. But how do you reason with anyone that’s so crazy?

The stranger licks his lips and hauls me upward by the elbow. “Get the fuck up. You have two seconds to do it yourself before I grab you by the hair and make you start moving.”

I shoot him a glare over my shoulder as I wipe my face with my bound hands. “Don’t talk to me like that.”

He cuffs me on the back of the head, as casual as if he did it all the time. I’m a little shocked and disoriented; he grabs me by the back of my neck, ripping at my hair, and lifts me off the ground.

It’s so painful that I manage to get my feet beneath me and lunge forward. Anything to get away from that touch.

He grabs the back of my dress and guides me toward the stairs. “Be smart. Don’t struggle. Maybe if you are good, he’ll let you go eventually.”

As I hit the staircase, my tears really begin to fall. “No.” I shake my head, knowing full well the answer to the unspoken question. “Constantine

will never let me go. You're sending me to my death."

He looks at me, pursing his lips. "Constantine has nothing to do with this. Surely you know that by now. You are being brought back to your family."

"What?" I blink, astonished. "My mom and dad are behind this?"

My captor rolls his eyes, pushing me forward with a beefy hand. And I ascend those stairs, not knowing what lies ahead, but certain of the dark and dangerous tightrope I walk.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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HADES

I tighten my grip on the garrote that encircles the man's throat. The man gasps and tries to pry the piano wire from around his neck. His stubby fingers are no help; the garrote is pressed too tightly into his skin just below his Adam's apple.

The man looks at me, his tawny skin gleaming with sweat, the whites of his dark eyes bulging slightly. His cheeks are puffed out, gone past ruddy to a darker shade. I can see the red creep up his face until it reaches the skin around his eyes. Years of experience with getting information from people tells me that he will pass out in a few seconds.

After which I will have to decide if I want to wake him up with a splash of cold water to the face... or whether I wouldn't rather just feel him die.

I tighten the piano wire just a little. The man slaps at my hands, which would honestly be pretty funny if he wasn't withholding precious information from me.

I smile as he tries to speak. He can't quite get enough breath to form words. When I eventually loosen my garrote, maybe he will be more interested in telling me where Persephone is.

I let him strangle for a few more seconds, pursing my lips.

"Are ye rethinking yer whole life yet?" I ask the man.

The sound of heavy boots on the metal stairs behind me doesn't faze me.

"Hades..." Eros clears his throat. "Come upstairs. You've been at this for hours."

My lips twitch. I loosen the piano wire around my captive's neck. The man sucks in breaths, his grateful gaze landing on my brother.

Eros rolls his eyes. “Your friends are dead,” he explains in slow Arabic. “I didn’t save you. If we leave this room, you can bet you won’t be alive.”

“Unless he talks,” I chime in. “Seriously, don’t make me leave here empty handed. I am already not in a very good mood. I think you would rather help me than to make me angrier.”

I release my hold on the man, stepping back. He nods his head frantically as he staggers back to lean against the wall. His hands rest on his knees, his head droops.

I look at Eros, arching a brow. Switching to English, I interrogate him. “Do you have news?”

Eros gives a half shrug. “I’d rather not get into it with our friend here. It’s hard to tell which Algerians might speak English.”

I run a hand through my chin-length dark hair, pushing my cheek out with my tongue.

Eros is right. It’s time to wrap things up with this particular captive.

I stroll over to a little table, upon which I have placed a shiny chrome gun, a bloodied pair of brass knuckles, and a length of heavy chain. Picking up the gun, I check the ammo in a quick, practiced motion.

When I sweep it across the basement and point it at the stranger, he straightens up and swallows heavily.

“Well?” I demand, switching to Arabic. “What do you know? Where is the girl?”

“Please.” He holds his hands out, looking scared. “I only know where they are taking her. And I will tell you... but not in here.”

Without so much as a twitch, I move my gun just to the left of his head and fire off a shot. The bullet ricochets wildly for a second, causing the man to cover his head. Eros steps back with a frown, eying me.

“Don’t worry,” I say softly. “The next one is going right into his fucking brain.”

“He took her back to the States!” the man blurts out, ducking his head behind his hands. “Constantine kept talking about the beach and how it would be just like old times.” He shakes his head, not even trying to disguise the fact that he is crying. “He’s not right in the head, that Constantine. A crazy, violent man. Unstable.”

“You’re saying that to a basement full of men with guns pointed at your head.” I narrow my eyes at him and purse my lips. Then I shrug a shoulder at Eros.

“He was helpful, but only when he thought we were going to shoot him in the head. So have him dropped off in another country and left with nothing.” I fix him with my gaze. “You’ll keep nothing but your life.”

I turn around, my mind already at work on the problem at hand. As I climb the steep stairs, I try to remember if Persephone ever told me where exactly she and Constantine lived.

My foot hits the top step just in time for a shot to ring out below me. I pause, gripping my gun.

Eros calls out. “Can’t have any loose ends, can we?”

I frown, climbing the last step. True to his word, Eros comes trotting up the stairs, as carefree as you please.

“Watch yourself, or ye’ll have me thinking ye’ve gone and traded places with Ares.” A muscle ticks in my jaw as I watch him push a hand through his shirt, dark pompadour. He shrugs.

“It needed doing, so I did it.” He sticks his gun in his waistband and straightens his dark cuffs.

“I spared his life.” I push my middle finger into his chest. “You don’t climb over my decisions. I’m still the one in charge here.”

Eros looks at me sharply, pushing his cheek out with his tongue. “Aye, so ye’ve said.”

I splay my hand out against the solid wall of his chest, giving him a little push. My mouth twists bitterly.

“Do we have a problem, Eros? First you leave my girl unprotected and she gets fucking taken by force. And now yer questioning my decision making?”

He releases an exaggerated sigh. “Nobody wants ye focused on anything that’s not business. This thing we’re doing right now? This is distracting you from that goal. So the sooner we can find your little whore and get back to work, the better—”

I crank back my arm, slugging him right in the jaw. He’s still a Lyon, so he knows how to take the punch. But he’s thrown back a few steps, his hand touching his jaw. He looks at me with nothing but contempt.

I raise my hand, holding a finger aloft in warning. “Not another word, brother.”

He turns his head and spits on the floor, clenching his jaw tightly. I storm through the tiny house, bursting out of the structure. A broad sweep of stars greet me; we are far enough outside civilization that it’s nothing but

bright diamonds sprinkled in a vast sheet of black velvet above. All around me, there is nothing to greet the dark skies but sand, rock, and the occasional scruffy plant.

Ares leans against the black sedan we drove here in, looking up at me. His expression is careful, measuring. As I stalk toward the car, Eros emerges from the house.

Ares pushes himself off the car, his gaze traveling between the two of us. "Did ye get a location out of him?"

"Sort of. He confessed that Constantine mentioned something vague about the beach and the States. I believe that he might mean New Orleans."

Eros screws up his face. "New Orleans doesn't have a beach. It's a good distance from the coast, if I remember correctly."

I reach the car and wrench the driver's side door open. "Yeah, well. I'm going to drive to the nearest airport that will take our fake papers. And you get on the phone and find out where Constantine could be taking Persephone." I start to get in the car, then hesitate. "Persephone once mentioned that she and Constantine lived together on this beach. So... maybe try Etienne."

Eros jogs up to the car, hand on his chin where I hit him. He silently opens the door and slides into the back seat, as sullen as a little boy.

Ares looks at me, lifting his brows. I just shake my head.

"Do we need to..." Ares pauses, looking back at the house. "Are we just going to leave the bugger here?"

"Eros took it upon himself to kill our last source." I climb into the car. "Come on. Pick up the phone. I'll work on getting us back to civilization."

He jogs around to the passenger side, quickly letting himself in. He turns, quirking a brow at Eros. Eros flips him off and then looks away, staring out his window.

I let out a growl as I start the car.

I'm coming for you, Persephone. And I'm going to rain down hellfire when I find you.

With her face in my mind, I rev the engine and then take off at full speed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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PERSEPHONE

I don't see Constantine for the first couple of days after I am dragged back to the States. I was drugged some time during the final leg of my return. But when I wake up in a strange bedroom, woozy from the barbiturates and jet lagged beyond belief, I know exactly where I am.

The gentle wish-wash of the sea sighing just outside my window. The distinctive color and quality of the late afternoon sun, baking down on stripes of red clay and sandy grey soil. The bedroom itself, with its lofted white ceilings, smooth dark wood floors, and the choice of a black wrought iron bed frame with rough white linen sheets. It is no doubt designed to hint both at antebellum wealth and ancient Italian houses with grand columns two stories high out front. I may not know where I am, but I've been in this exact place a thousand times before.

In other words, I'm definitely in coastal Mississippi.

Head pounding, I sit up with a groan. I realize with a shiver that my loose black caftan is gone, replaced by a yellow sundress with a tight bodice and skinny straps. The feeling of violation that washes over me brings a wave of nausea along with it. Not only did strangers probably see my lifeless body being carried through airports and into this house, but strange hands saw me naked and changed my clothes.

My fists curl at the same time that tears prick at my eyes. Fury and helplessness make me hang my head for a moment. I suck in cool breaths and try to contain my emotions; there is nothing helped by losing my temper just now.

At length, my stomach rumbles. It has been a while since I've had a proper meal. I push myself off the bed, standing a bit unsteadily at first.

Whatever was in the pills the strange man gave me was very potent and it's making it hard to think.

Looking around the room, I see two soaring, impossibly huge windows that face out into the bright sun. Heading over to one, I brush aside the lacy white curtain, peering out.

We are right on the beach. Not three hundred yards from where I stand right now, waves lap gently at the shore, foamy water fanning out over the sandy ground and then retreating in a quiet rhythm.

I lean against the white window sash, blinking as I try to form a coherent thought. The brilliant blue sky seems to mock my drug-addled stillness. Out amongst the gray sand dunes, a white plastic bag whips back and forth, the wind pulling at it with frenzied, unseen fingers.

A loud noise from behind me makes me jump and whip my head around with wild eyes. The bedroom door bangs open, and I see a shiny silver clothing rack push into the room, swollen with sleek red and black clothing.

Constantine's eyes glint when he sees me standing at the window. "Good. You're up."

A chill slides through my blood at his knowing smirk. "Constantine—"

"Ah ah," he says, holding up a hand.

My reaction to that correction — ah ah — is a physical shudder of horror. How many times did I hear that when I was in a relationship with this madman? Too many times to count. I feel acid sloshing around in the pit of my stomach.

I have to get myself out of here. If I die, at least it will be fighting for my own freedom.

Constantine wheels the rack near the bed, stopping and leaning up against it. He looks ridiculous as ever in his blood red button up and maroon slacks; his blond hair is slicked back, the tendril of a curl carefully kept pressed against his forehead. His inky brown eyes glitter dangerously, and he tilts his head, his smirk growing.

"You will require a new wardrobe." He says it matter-of-factly, as though he didn't just take me from Africa by force.

I open my mouth to tell him where he can put his new wardrobe, but he just shakes his head, cutting off my words.

"I'll tell you when you are expected to speak." He gestures to the clothes. "Pick out some clothes, Persephone."

I cross my arms, my expression tightening, and hold my ground. A note of amusement flits across Constantine's face and he starts riffling through the garments, moving each hanger aside as he judges them.

I can't help but notice that most of the so-called outfits are barely more than lingerie. A crushed blue velvet bikini, a lacy see through black corset, and a silky blood red teddy catch my eye. I can't help but swallow hard as I watch Constantine flip through the rack.

I can't stand the silence in the room. He knows it, too. He can barely keep a full smile off his face as he runs his hand over a shiny black leather bustier.

"I'm not wearing any of those," I blurt out.

He raises his eyes to mine and gives me a cocky grin. I see that I've lost the little game between the two of us by letting him know how nervous I am.

"Oh Penny." He bites his lip. "Penny, Penny, Penny. You're going to change into one of these outfits right here, right now. You're going to come downstairs. And you're going to entertain the guests that I have arriving." He sniffs, looking me up and down. "You know, you're fucking broken. Your left hand, there? I did that. I made my mark on you once. This time, I won't let you go until you die."

"Fuck you." White hot adrenaline fissions through my veins, heating me from the inside out. My voice is low, my anger threatening to boil over. "You're not worth a damned thing. Certainly not anything to be afraid of. When I was young, I didn't know. But I know now."

He sucks his teeth, rolling his eyes at me. He pulls a hanger off the rack, a shiny off-white latex miniskirt and matching blocky tube top. He struts over to me, sizing me up with an icy gaze, and thrusts the outfit into my chest.

My heartbeat gallops against my ribs, a wild horse that cannot be tamed. I jerk my chin up, holding back my tears. When he pushes the outfit at me, I ignore it, letting it fall to the ground.

Quick as lightning, he smacks me across the cheek. For a second, I can't process his hand flying at my face and the sound of the slap, like the most perfect hand clap.

I'm frozen, shocked beyond belief.

My cheek starts stinging. I raise my left hand to my face, the damaged one. As I start to turn my eyes toward Constantine, his hand snakes out

again.

This time he catches my damaged hand, pulling it back by the middle finger until I make a rough gasp. In a split second, I go from furious and indignant to worried that Constantine might actually break my fucking hand.

“You’ll do as you’re told,” he announces. “If I say you’re going to suck and fuck your way through my party, you will. If I want you to walk across a bed of hot coals, you will. You’ll do whatever I tell you to, because if you don’t...”

He pulls harder on my finger until I cry out. Then he just smiles, enjoying my anguish.

“If you don’t do what I want, I’ll fucking kill you. I won’t leave you this time until your body is broken, and your bones are nothing but ash. You got me?”

Tears fill my eyes, breaking free and rolling down my face. Rage wells up inside of me. I don’t trust my voice to shout my feelings, not without a betraying tremor of unadulterated fear.

So I act on impulse, spitting in right in his face. His smile slips away, and his face grows deadly serious.

He grabs me by the throat, lifting me off my feet. I start to choke, my fingers clawing at his wrists. But he just holds me up like that, even shaking me a little to get me to stop struggling.

I can’t stop, of course. I flail, my heartbeat loud in my ears, my face filling with blood. I try to scream but I can’t; he’s cut off even the remotest chance I have to breathe.

He pulls me close, whispering to me as one would a prayer to God. “I’m going to break you, Persephone. I’m going to watch you suffer. And then, when you’ve had far too much, I can’t wait to watch the light drain from your eyes.”

I slap at his hands, my vision tingeing red, turning splotchy with fat black spots. Constantine waits another agonizing second and then lets me go, dropping my entire weight. I plummet to the floor, sucking in gasps of air, disoriented.

Constantine bends down, picks up the skimpy white latex outfit, and then throws it at me. It hits me in the head, the metal hanger squeaking as it bounces off and hits the floor. I’m too busy on my hands and knees, trying to recover from nearly being choked to death.

“You have ten minutes,” he says, turning toward the door. “And let me just tell you this now... you don’t want me to come find you, Persephone.”

I hang my head between my shoulder blades, my breaths finally slowing. But by the time I look up, he’s gone.

The door hangs open, gaping in his absence.
Fuck, I really have to get away from here.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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PERSEPHONE

“I’m going to kill every single man who stands in my way of rescuing Persephone.” I crack my knuckles and stare out the window of our SUV. “I might need some backup, though.”

“I thought ye might feel that way.” Ares slides me a sly smile. “I had a team vetted and flown into a local airport, waiting on ye to say the word. They are ready to roll out and meet us at Constantine’s hideout.”

“Ye did what?” I ask, scrunching up my face. “Jaysus, Ares. Ye didn’t even know what I would say!”

He shoots me a small smile and dials a number on his phone. He looks at me with an unreadable expression as he waits for the line to be picked up.

“We are a go,” he says quietly. “I’m sending ye the address right now.” He listens for a moment, then nods. “Aye.”

I look at my window, shaking my head. My brother acted without my permission and likely deserves some kind of comeuppance. But I can’t even focus on that.

I’m practically vibrating with the need to see Persephone. To know she’s safe, yes. But honestly, I hate the fact that Constantine thought he could fuck with her when she was under my protection.

No one gets to touch what’s mine.

I clench and unclench my fists as we race down the mostly empty highways. There is an unexplored thought floating around — what does it mean for Persephone to be mine?

But I shove that down, trying to think of more practical things. The landscape gradually begins to shift as we leave the highway for a little two lane road that carries us to the address that Etienne gave us. The red clay

lightens, big swathes of gray sandy soil taking over. The trees grow sparser, the ground on both sides of the SUV sprouting thick, green-beige grasses that grow high and wild.

When we come around a long curve, the ocean appears before me, spreading out across the horizon. It's difficult to tell the light brown sand of the shore from the murky dark waters. Above it all, the sky is a sullen blue-gray, the clouds gathering ever so slowly.

"Jesus." Ares shifts in his seat, cracking his neck. "How much further out can we even go?"

I check my phone, which has been counting down the miles and minutes until we reach our destination. "It says we will be there in fifteen minutes."

Ares pulls his gun from his waistband and checks the clip. I've come to recognize this preparation as a sign of Ares' fidgeting. Eyeing him, I drag in long breaths.

"Almost there, brother."

Ares shrugs like he doesn't care. "Aye."

I can just make out a large gray beach house in the distance, a few scraggly trees growing around it. My heart rate increases as the driver begins winding his way up the narrow path toward the house.

"Pull over," I direct him. "And stay vigilant."

"Sir." The dark-suited driver edges the SUV onto the shoulder of the road.

The second he stops, I'm out of the car like a lightning bolt. Ares follows me as I walk about a minute further, just until the beach house is fully in my line of sight. My brother seems pensive as he prowls around me, checking out the house and the lines of sight.

"It seems quiet at the house," he says, jerking his head toward it. "How do we even know that they are there?"

I point to the side of the beach house, where several dark SUVs are parked. Right next to them is a silver Rolls Royce Phantom.

"I think we can safely guess that someone is in there."

Ares nods slowly, fishing his phone out of his pocket. As soon as he starts to look at it, two black SUVs come into sight.

"Fuck."

The last thing I need is having Constantine's goons stumble upon us as we are gearing up to attack the house.

I start moving off the road, searching for some shelter. My heart races as I realize that the best defense is going to be getting low to the ground.

Ares catches my arm, jerking his head toward the approaching cars. “That’s security team.”

I stare at my brother for a second before giving him a tight nod. The SUVs pull up, ten extremely fit-looking men in the same black polo shirts and black slacks piling out.

As I look on, a man with chestnut-hued skin and a freshly-shaved head approaches. The guy eyes me and Ares up, flexing his arm muscles casually as he reaches out his hand.

“Sam White.” He has a crisp British accent and an accompanyingly stiff body language, holding himself just so with ease. He reminds me of nothing so much as a soldier.

I shake his hand, my eyes narrowing. “Hades Lyon. Fourteenth battalion. You?”

Some warmth glitters in Sam’s brown eyes. “Seventh battalion, sir.”

I nod, stepping back and falling into an old “at ease” posture without much thinking about it. My hands clasp behind my back, my legs spreading just a bit wide.

Ready for anything.

“Good to see you all here,” Ares cuts in. “As you can see, we need some backup breaching and entering that house. There is a valuable hostage inside.”

He pulls up a picture of Persephone on his phone. I’m a little surprised at that; I give him side eye as I repress the questions of how he came to possess that photo and how long he’s had it for.

There are so many things that I wish I could spend time on today. But topmost in my mind has to be Persephone.

I just need to keep bringing myself back to her well-being. It centers me.

Sam turns, taking in the scene. He inhales deeply as he takes a few steps in each direction, checking the lines of sight for himself.

“We need some heavy weapons.” He nods to one of his men, who vanishes back toward his black SUV. “I’m assuming that you’ll be fine with that, given your reputation as an arms dealer.”

Ares cuts me a look. “This is a kidnapping. As long as the girl is safe, we are okay with any use of force. Right, Hades?”

I nod, my eyes returning to the beach house. “Nothing is off the table.”

Sam looks over his shoulder, signaling to the man that disappeared behind their SUV. That man steps out with a rocket-propelled grenade launcher on his shoulder and a grin on his face.

“Ready for war, boss.”

I raise my eyebrows, unprepared for how much firepower he is sporting.

“Ye do know that we have to extract someone from that house, don’t ye?” Ares asks.

“My man is just a diversionary tactic to get as many of the men out of the house as possible. When we get the majority out and firing their weapons at us, we hit the house and pull the girl out. Easy as pie.”

I squint at him, trying to determine how easy it will actually be. Ares claps me on the shoulder.

“Time is in short supply. It’s the best shot we have.”

I survey all the men, giving them a final once over. My heart hammers against my ribs but I keep my face a cool, calm mask.

I nod once. Sam gives me an approving nod in exchange. He raises his right fist.

“Everyone grab their weapons and start moving toward the house. Ye two guards, come with us. The rest of ye, head to the other side of the house and find defensive positions. Prepare to take a hell of a lot of fire.”

Everyone turns toward the house, checking their weapons. I let the security team go first, studying Ares as I watch them spread around the back of the house.

“Ready?” Ares prompts.

I pull out my gun, checking the clip again. “As ready as I can be. I just know that Constantine is going to be waiting for us with a nasty surprise.”

Ares turns and starts heading after the security team. “We’ll save Persephone. Just focus on that, brother.”

Swallowing an unwelcome note of fear, I follow him, my gun trained on the ground in front of me, my footsteps quick and nearly silent.

“Ready?”

I look over at my brothers who nod solemnly.

“I’m going to lead the way. Ye follow me. Eros can take the back. I want the other two men flanking me.”

I raise a brow.

"It sounds like I would be the protected one of the lot of us. That's a different song and dance than ye were presenting to me only a few weeks ago."

Ares shrugs a shoulder. "We're here to rescue yer woman. There's no point in doing any of that if yer not here to hug her at the end. Am I right?"

He looks at Eros and my other brother shrugs. "That's what I would do," he agrees.

I shrug. But of course Arias is right. I need to hold Penny after her rescue, to make sure that she and the baby are okay. Everything else is easily accomplished by my brothers or even the hired guns that will flank us as we roll in.

I screw up my face and try not to wince. "Fine." I point up at the house where we need to go. "Do ye have a plan in mind?"

Ares shrugs again and brandishes his weapon. "Not really. We don't know shit about what we're walking into right now. So my plan is really just to take down everybody that we see, and make sure that every shot is a kill shot."

"Yer goddamn right," mumbles Eros. "Let these fuckers know exactly what they got themselves into and who they decided to mess with. We are the fucking Lyon brothers, for fuck's sake."

I raise my eyes up to the house and try to formulate a plan. But Ares gestures to the two security guards. They all start sprinting toward the house, climbing up a gentle hill.

I grumble and start after them, my feet digging into the soft ground as I climb the grassy knoll behind my brother. My whole body is tense as I try to assess the situation from every conceivable angle. But it's still a surprise when someone shoots at us from a long distance, missing us but only by a hair's breadth.

Instinctively, I drop onto my belly and grit my teeth.

"Where the fuck are they shooting from?" Ares growls.

I prop myself up on my elbows and look around, spying someone a glint of metal from the far side of the house. I call attention to the shiny glint, tapping my brother on the shoulder.

"Right there. Look."

I have no sooner said it than one of the hired guns stands up and pops off a round straight at the glint of metal that I saw.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see movement. I turned my head and noticed that there is a parade of trucks moving slowly toward the house, winding down the same road that we came from.

Shit. I look at Ares, my face tight. "They have reinforcements."

Eros swings around and looks at Ares. "If you guys want to leave me with one of the security guards, we can easily hold down the fort and keep those guys from advancing on the house. That would just mean that he you have to go it alone, just the three of you."

I nod. "That's what we should do. If you're sure that you can hold down the fort, do it."

Eros nods and checks his clip, smiling grimly. We will lay low here and wait for them."

"Let's go. The situation at the house isn't going to get better by us waiting around," Ares says.

The three of us get up and start moving up the hill, trying to be as stealthy as possible. We come around a corner and almost stumble upon a guard.

He barely has time to raise his weapon when Ares fires at him, hitting him in the middle of his chest. He falls and already we are moving on, stepping over his body and advancing up the stairs into the actual porch.

As my head clears the porch, I glance around, licking my lips. But it seems that no one is guarding the porch. Just the lone guard, now just a body, fallen behind us.

I look at Aries, trying to judge whether or not to spread out or attack one single door of the house. He's obviously thinking the same thing, because he gestures that all three of us should head to the east. I crane my neck and spot a side door that's just a few feet away.

We move silently in a line, Ares creeping close to the house. We stop when Ares raises his hand. He waits for a second and then heads pokes his head into the doorway, looking through the glass window that affords him a view of the inside of the house.

He glances around and then looks at me, his eyes tightening.

Ares holds up a hand indicating that there are five people with guns inside the house that he can see.

He looks at the hired gun, sucking in a breath. I motion to kick in the door and then usher them back a few steps. I kick in the door as hard as I can and brandish my weapon.

Immediately, there is heat on me. The first movement I see, I aim at, and then the second I know for a fact that it's not Penny, I shoot.

The armed guard a shot at manages to get a round off first, firing and missing me by only millimeters. But that's what I get for being hesitant and trying not to shoot until I know what I am actually aiming at. I know that I am opening myself up to a lot more gunfire than I otherwise would be.

But Penny's life could hang in the balance.

In less than a minute, Aries and the guard have taken out the other four armed men, spraying the entire roof with bullets. I'll throw out an arm, gesturing for them to stop.

"We don't know yes Penny is upstairs or downstairs or even right behind the flimsy walls!" I hiss.

Ares stops, licking his lips.

"Aye," he says. "Lead the way."

I listen hard for footsteps, trying to sense where other people may be hiding or even heading to confront us.

But I'm surprised by the soundless entrance of a man and a woman. The man looks like he has seen better days; dark, ruffled hair, bright blue eyes, maybe fifty five years of age. The woman looks exactly like Penny but older. Raven hair, milky white skin, and a distinctly hectic energy around her.

These must be Penny's parents, then.

The man holds his hands up, clearly unarmed.

"You must be the young man that has ensnared Persephone." He touches his head, giving me a measuring gaze. "I'm Ben. This is Marcia, Persephone's mother. It seems to me that something can be worked out here. Perhaps a price? I know you are a businessman, not unlike myself..."

I don't even pause. Without even thinking about it, I shake my head. "There's only one way that I am leaving here today. And that's with Penny at my side."

Ben crosses his arms and his lips twitch. "You are stubborn. I'll give you that. Constantine said that you would be difficult to talk to."

"Constantine is dead. I shot him through the head." I fold my arms and give her parents a look to let them know that I'm running out of patience.

Marcia clutches Ben's arm and pales. "That's too bad, we had great plans for Persephone and Constantine. They had a future together."

“Constantine raped her. He killed her friend. And he pushed her off a cliff. Hell he left her for dead. I don’t see what there is to talk about. And I’m not sad that I killed him, either.

Marcia stares at me. “We don’t want you near Persephone. You’ve already tried to ruin her life. Just leave. We will put the baby up for adoption.”

“I don’t think that you’ve even taken into account the fact that Penny wants to be with me. We’re in love.”

“Love?” Her dad scoffs. “Persephone wouldn’t know what love was if it bit her in the ass. She is still young. Plenty of time to find a suitable companion, someone that we approve of.”

I glanced at Ares, giving him a little look.

Are Persephone’s parents serious? Are they deluded? It’s hard to tell.

Ares speaks up. “We’re not leaving here without the girl. So you can either hand her over or die. I don’t really pretend that it matters to me, honestly. I imagine that my brother won’t want to see you die, but if we have to kill you to get to her, we will. It’s not a problem.”

The hired gun brandishes his weapon, clearly edgy and itching for action.

“How much will it cost you just to forget all this? Fifty thousand dollars, perhaps?” Ben offers.

Ares lets out a laugh and Marcia curls her lip at him.

I fire back. “You’re not listening. I’m starting to understand why Persephone ran away from your family so damn fast. Why it is she fell in with the first man that showed her the slightest hint of interest. This is fucked up. Yer all fucked up.”

Marcia throws her hands up in the air. “Ben, you said that he would accept a number. Are you just going to let him talk to you like this?”

Ben sighs and crosses his arms. “It hardly matters. Persephone is downstairs right now, meeting new potential matches and she is going to pick one of them. You watch.”

I take aim at Ben, offering him a final chance. “Tell me where she is. Let us pass and I will spare ye.”

He stares me down. “I don’t think you will hurt us.”

Adjusting my aim just a hair, I fire a shot straight through his thigh. He makes a squawk and blood spurts out, spraying Marcia. She screams and he clamps his hands down over the bullet hole, going pale.

“I tried to warn ye,” I say. “Now where is Penny?”

Ares is already checking out the house, hunting for a staircase. Marcia seems to be in shock, but he calls out. “Over here. I think this door leads downstairs.”

I look at the security guard, jerking my head toward Marcia. “Stay up here and keep watch over her. We don’t want her to get any ideas.”

“Bastards!” Ben cries. “You won’t get away with this.”

But I am already slipping out of the room, my weapon at the ready as Ares yanks the basement door open.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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PERSEPHONE

Standing in the foot of the stairs of the dark basement, I balk at entering through the doorway. I can't see inside but I can hear the murmur of voices. Constantine dressed me like a hooker Barbie in two tiny strips of pearly white latex and a towering pair of heels. But he vanished soon after, leaving me to be dragged down here by a stranger dressed in black tactical gear and carrying a big black gun on a shoulder sling.

The guard stands behind me now, pushing me inside the doorway with a growl. I swallow, looking around at the black leather-decorated room. My brain glosses over the low black velvet couches pushed near the walls. All I can see are the strange older men who turn to look at me.

The man closest to me wears a neat dark suit and is completely bald. He steps closer to me, a tumbler of whiskey in his grasp, his free hand stretching out toward me. I can see the malicious gleam in his watery eyes and the tiny smirk that curves his thin, papery mouth.

My heart drops to my feet as I realize that I don't know a single one of these men. Constantine has truly found the most hellish experience for me. I clench my fists, feeling a ringing ache in my right hand.

"Constantine said you were beautiful," the man closest to me rasps. He touches my arm, making me jump backward half a step.

I glare at him, willing my voice not to tremble. "Don't touch me."

"Feisty." He grins, turning around and grinning at the other men in the room. "I thought he was trying to sell me. But now I see that he described you perfectly. You truly are a beauty... but when we are all done taking turns with you, you will be utterly broken." He steps forward and grips my

forearm, his fingers digging into my flesh painfully. His eyes shine with a dark glee. “I can’t wait to ruin you, you pretty little thing.”

I yank at my arm and back up another step. The guard behind me sticks the ice-cold muzzle of his gun between two vertebrae of my spine which makes my entire body go rigid.

Acid swirls in the pit of my stomach. A fine sheen of sweat breaks out on my forehead and the nape of my neck.

“Where is Constantine?” I ask. The question barrels out of my mouth as a questioning yelp.

The man in front of me gives a careful smile. “I don’t think we need him.” He looks behind him at the other men, arching a brow. “We can take care of her, can’t we?”

No.

There is no way I’m going to just passively let this happen to me. I wish for the first time in my entire life that I had access to a knife or a gun, anything that could be used to hurt these men before they hurt me. Two of them stand up, salacious looks on both of their faces.

God, think! Don’t let fear rule you.

Not like the last time Constantine meted out punishment to you...

The guard as my back presses his gun into my flesh. But I don’t shrink away. No, I think as rationally as I can with blood pounding through my head.

What are the chances that the guard has been given orders to shoot me? Very, very unlikely.

So I only have to worry about the other men. My mouth is dry as the Sahara, but I just swallow when the whole group of men begin to advance on me.

My chin lifts, my expression haughty. I look the balding stranger in the eye, smirking.

The puzzled expression that crosses his face for a moment eggs me on.

He grabs me again, hauling me against him. I let him pull me close, still smirking. Inside, I’m trying to remember what I read about self-defense.

Something like: go for the eyes and the soft, fleshy bits of the face first.

As soon as he opens his mouth, I hit him in the face, raking my nails down in a diagonal swipe. I claw him as hard as I can, no holding back a single ounce of effort.

He rears back, uttering a cry, trying to get away. My nails skim one of his eyes and land in the fleshy part of his cheek. I dig in so hard that I not only pierce his skin but actually break through his cheek with my forefinger.

I can feel the slippery blood flowing into his mouth for a second before he clutches my shoulders and flings me away with a great deal of force.

My head pounds. My heart skitters. I put my hands out to break my fall as I crash to the concrete basement floor. It's everything I can do not to retch as I scrabble to find my feet.

"Fucking bitch!" the man wails.

The guard's heavy boots approach me first and I turn, reaching for the heavy black gun. He stops with a surprised grunt, confirming what I thought might be true.

His purpose is to keep me in line, bot to hurt me.

The man I attacked is leaning forward, his face obscured by his hands. Another man in a tuxedo sneers at me and lunges toward me. I hear a quiet snick as he waves a blade at me.

"Get on all fours!" he booms. "Or I'll cut you up so bad that your momma won't recognize you."

I spit at him, taking him by surprise. But that doesn't stop him from tackling me and pressing his knife to my throat. He sprawls out on top of me, and I panic.

This can't be how I die.

Struggling against the man's hold, I wonder if I can make the same assumption about him as I did the guard.

Will he have been given instructions not to hurt me?

Trying to surge up with all my strength, I soon find out. I feel the sharp, hot press of the blade against my skin. Then I feel a heated trickle of my own blood welling up just above the line of the blade.

"I'll kill you," the man growls into my ear. "Stop moving, you cunt."

I grit my teeth, pushing against the heaviness of his body. "I'd rather die."

"Gladly!" he hisses back.

He's much larger and heavier than me, easily restraining my arms and legs. I can smell his vile breath, like rotting meat covered with a wash of bourbon. I gag a little when I realize that he's fully erect, his cock grinding into my hip.

Tears prick my eyelids as I writhe under him. I look back at the room, for some kind of help.

Surely one of these men has a soft spot. The man on top of me cuts off my breath, so the best I can do is huff out a strangled phrase.

“Don’t... any... of you have... a daughter?”

Two of the men stiffen. But the other ones, including the one whose face I ripped up, only seem encouraged by my words.

The wounded man grips his cheek, spittle flying as he lets loose his invective. “When I come back downstairs, I’m going to show you all the things I would do to my daughter if I thought no one would ever find out. And then I’m going to watch the light drain from your eyes—”

A soft whizzing sound cuts off his words. His eyes bulge. He clutches his neck, where a perfect bullet hole begins to gush dark red blood. He falls to the floor with a muted thump.

I make eye contact with him for a second, watching with wide eyes as he bleeds out onto the floor. His rheumy eyes go dead; one second, he’s there, the next second... he’s not.

I let out a scream.

The man on top of me jumps up just as the whizzing sound comes again. I roll over as I could the muzzled gun shots.

One shot, two shots, three shots.

The guard has foolishly stuck only his head out of the doorway, trying to find the source of the shots. The three shots kill the guard before he can even swing his gun around to protect himself. He grunts as he is hit, then falls down, dead as a doornail.

Then I hear the most amazing sound of my entire life. A thick Scottish burr, so recognizable that it slices right through the men yelling and the sound of the men’s dress shoes on the hard cement floor.

“Send the girl out!” Hades shouts from the staircase. “I’ll give ye no more trouble after that.”

Silence reigns. The younger man who tackled me scowls and jerks his head toward the back of the room. “You’re not going anywhere.”

I raise my head, screaming his name. “Hades!”

The man starts toward me. In a split second, I look at the guard slumped on the floor in the doorway. Without fully thinking it out, I dart toward him, my eyes focused on his weapon.

Several things happen at once.

I reach the doorway. Hades spots me as he lands on the bottom step. He points two heavy black guns with matching silencers straight at me, his eyes gleaming with malice.

“Get down,” he says.

I duck, covering my head and weaving toward one wall. Hades opens fire, raining down death upon everyone left in the black leather basement. Bullets whiz so softly that we it not for the grunts and cries of the men behind me, I would have thought that Hades missed.

My pulse pounds. I’m trembling all over; my right hand is stained with blood. I can barely see now because at some point in all of this mess, I started to cry.

Hades snakes an arm out, gripping me. I look up at him, my breath stopping. His eyes bore into mine, his expression unspeakably intense.

“You came,” I find myself saying.

“Aye, lass.” He pulls me close, ever so briefly kissing my lips. The sizzling press of his lips against mine sears me through and through.

But he releases me quickly, spinning me around. I look at the basement room, swallowing a big lump.

The bodies of the men are there, spilled across the floor. All dead, all staring blankly, their expressions contorted.

Acting on instinct, I turn my face away, a sob escaping my chest.

I raise my eyes to Hades, a question on my lips. “Why?”

“Ye need to see for yourself,” he answers. He cups my cheek briefly, gripping my face. “Those men will never hurt ye again. I’ve made sure of it, Persephone.”

I nod quickly, pressing myself against the shelter of his body. He kisses the top of my head, then barks an order at me.

“Upstairs. Let’s go, lass.”

“Wait.” I pull at Hades’ hands. “Am I... am I going to see my mother’s body upstairs?”

He shoves his head. “I didn’t kill them. I don’t know how we are going to live in the same world as them, though. They seem determined to keep coming after ye.”

“What if...” I blush. “What if we just lay low for a while? We can go to your castle and prepare for the baby.”

“Too many people know about the castle. But you are right, we should go to ground somewhere until the baby is born. Maybe we can come up

with a plan then.”

My heart squeezes and I nod.

“Thank you, Hades.”

He kisses me, hard and quick, a possessive kiss if I’ve ever had one.

“I love you, Persephone. You’re my heart. I’ll always come for you, until the end of time. That I vow.”

“Oh god. I love you too, Hades!” A sob bursts from my chest and I cling to him for several moments.

When Hades releases me, he takes my hand. As he leads me out of the basement, I try not to dissolve into a tearful mess when I climb the stairs.

He came for me.

Somehow. Some way.

He saved me. Saved our daughter.

His vow rings through my head.

I’ll always come for you, until the end of time.

I try to let that wash over me without breaking down as I go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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HADES

As we are getting into the back seat of our SUV and leaving Mississippi behind, Persephone crawls into my lap. I put my arms around her fragile, trembling body and urge her to rest her head against my chest.

She does, placing her face against my beating heart. Her eyes close and she looks like a fucking angel. An angel that has been through hell, with dark smudges under both of her eyes and obvious bruises on her upper arms and chest.

“I love ye,” I say into her hair. “I love ye, Persephone. And right this minute, I’m going to divest of the arms dealing business. I’m going to devote my life to you and our daughter. I swear that to ye, Penny.”

Penny looks at me, a little shocked and definitely worn out. “I love you too, Hades.”

She doesn’t comment on anything else that I said, just lays her head on my chest and burrows deep.

I’ll kill Constantine for this. For every fucking bruise that he dared to put on her body, I swear I’ll torture, maim, and eviscerate someone that he loves.

I’m so keyed up right now that I’m practically vibrating with the need to crush, to hurt, to kill. I brush wisps of Persephone’s long, dark hair from her angular cheekbones and expose her delicate forehead.

I need something from her. Something... emotional. But I have no idea what to even ask for, so I just simmer in my righteous, violent anger.

Persephone licks her lips and cracks open her eyes. She shivers, even though it’s still summer.

“I’m cold. And... and thirsty.”

She's wearing a skimpy little two piece dress and she seems... skinnier than I remembered, somehow.

It's hard to believe that she was only missing for four fucking days.

I notice a blueish cast to her lips, and I quickly curse aloud.

"Motherfucker." I look up, alarmed.

Before I can even ask Ares for a blanket, he roots around in the front passenger seat and produces a blanket and a bottle of water. Handing them to me, he gets in the driver's seat and pulls out following the SUV carrying the security team.

As the car starts moving, I unfold the blanket and tuck the ends securely around Persephone. She cuddles even closer into my chest, her entire body shaking. My heart wrenches in my chest.

"She all right?" Ares asks, looking in the rearview mirror.

"She's definitely going into bloody shock," I answer.

"Fuck," he breathes. "Okay. We will be back at the air strip in twenty minutes. I will text the air crew to be ready for us."

"Aye." If I learned anything at all in my time in the military, I need to lay her down, keep her body temperature high, and keep her still. Swiftly moving her, I ignore her groan of displeasure.

"Shh, lass," I tell her, keeping my tone even and melodic. Tucking the blanket around her, I try desperately not to let any of the fury building in my chest leak out where Persephone can see it. Just now, my role is her savior. I can cradle her and assure her that she's safe while I carry her to safety.

Everything else, all the violent impulses that I have when I look at Persephone's state?

It can wait.

Ares turns around in his seat for a moment, sparing Persephone a glance. His light eyes peer out from beneath hooded lids, but I can't interpret any expression on his face. He gestures to me with his cell phone.

"The plane should be ready for us when we get there."

I suck in a deep breath, trying to shift my focus forward. I've been hellbent on having this girl in my arms again for days. But for once in my goddamned life, I have no idea what is next. There's no plan A, much less plans B and Constantine.

I'm a tiny canoe in a viciously swift current, unmoored and without a fucking paddle. Everything I've built my life around — the neat way I used

being over prepared as a kind of weapon — it's all scattered to the winds now.

I give Ares a nod, letting him know I heard his question. Turning away, I stare out the window at the passing scenery.

I know that we will need some time to ourselves, to recover and plot our revenge. But where are we going to hide?

Penny turns in my arms. Her movement draws my eyes to her face again. Her eyes drift open, focusing on me.

She places a small hand on my chest, almost like she is reassuring me. The tenderness of the moment surprises me, makes my chest tighten.

I pick up her hand, kissing the palm. Her eyes bore into mine and I sense something passing between us, a nearly palpable fission.

“It’ll be okay,” she whispers. “Don’t look so angry, Hades.”

I kiss her hand again, doing my damndest to repress a shudder. “I can see that you’re tired. Go to sleep, Penny.”

Her eyelids droop as she nods her head, turning it to furrow against my chest.

“Hades.”

I glance up at my brother in the front seat, irritated that he should intrude on such a moment. “What?”

He shoves a hand through his chin-length brown curls. “I have an idea.” His expression tightens. “We’re not gonna like it though.”

“Well?” If I didn’t have Persephone in my arms, I would probably lean forward and give him a healthy shove. “Out with it.”

“Ye should take Persephone to ground in Whitewraithe.”

My entire body goes rigid. My face goes red, and I glare at Ares.

One word - Whitewraithe - has me on the edge of throwing a fit. My brother has just name dropped the one town that I wouldn’t ever dream of going.

“Why in the fuck would I go there?”

Penny opens her eyes, pushing against my chest to sit up against me. Before I can tell her to go back to sleep, she places a quelling hand against my chest.

“Where is this place? What’s it called? White... thwart?”

Ares jumps in to answer her question. “It’s the manor house that took in our Ma after she left us. So it’s still in Scotland, but only just.”

My jaw clenches. “You mean they fucking sheltered our coward of a mother after she vanished from our lives forever.”

Persephone blinks, her eyes widening. “Forever?”

“We don’t know what became of her,” Ares fills in. “Which means that Whitewraithe is nothing if not discreet. It’s shrouded in mist and secrets. And it happens to be owned by our uncle.”

“That man is not our uncle, Ares,” I snap.

Ares shrugs noncommittally. “He’s our ma’s uncle. So he’s kin.”

“Are ye just going to pretend that we are welcome at Whitewraithe, then?” I ask, disgusted.

Ares purses his lips. “Have ye got a better idea, Hades?” His gaze slides away from my face to the road ahead and he shrugs. “Because I think you know as well as I do that Whitewraithe is a damned good option. Ma left us the photo of the place with the address written on the back for a reason. If there was ever a time to pull the rip cord and save yourself...”

“We can go anywhere!” I shout. I bang my hand repeatedly against the leather seat beside my leg. “Anywhere would be better than that!”

Persephone winces and pulls her arms from mine, scooting away from me.

“Fuck,” I mutter. “Penny...”

She huddles against the door on the other side of the car, looking more tired than I’ve ever seen her. “If you’re going to shout and hit things, I’m fine over here.”

I’m very god damned close to losing control. I look at Persephone, my mouth drawing into a tight circle. My fists clench and unclench.

“Hades. Just... we have to refuel in New York anyway. Think about Whitewraithe. And if you can’t come up with a better plan by the time we touch down in the big apple, then...” He throws his hands up in the air for a second.

I glance at him. Then at the road before us, realizing that he’s right. Any minute now we will pull up to the airport and have to tell the flight crew just where to fly us.

Glancing over at Penny, I blow out a long breath. “Fine,” I grate out. “Put it on the flight manifest. And if I can’t come up with a better place before New York...”

I clamp my lips shut, feeling a pulse of anger sluice through the veins. Ares turns around, texting and driving.

I slide my hand out, gripping Penny's knee. She looks at me, as if she's uncertain about my intentions. The distrust in her eyes is a knife to my heart.

A few minutes later, she lets me pull her back onto my lap and cover her with the blanket again. A muscle ticks in my cheek as I try to be naught but her savior once more.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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PERSEPHONE

It's late at night when we fly in over the icy black sea to the northeastern tip of Scotland. The sun vanished when Hades hustled me into the backseat of a waiting car. Ever since, I have stared out the window at the blur of light sand and dark waves that makes up the shore as we pass it by. There is nothing out here on the lonely highway Hades drives down. No other light but our headlights, illuminating this winding, twisting rut of a road as we climb steep hills and plummet down narrow, claustrophobic valleys.

I yawn and stretch my legs, watching Hades as he navigates, seeming almost unthinking though I know that he is the opposite. He whips our little black Porsche around sharp turns and yet he seems...

Well, not peaceful. But I can no longer tell that he's planning murder and mayhem from his expression alone. I shift in my seat, thinking that I would feel much more comforted if Hades weren't currently driving a bat out of hell.

He looks at me, his brief glance making his expression tighten. "What?"

His voice is a wire stretched too thin and then strummed. Taut, as if all the tension I could read in his face is still very much inside him.

I scrunch my face to the side and shrug.

"I didn't say anything."

Hades smiles humorlessly, his expression cruel. "I can hear ye thinking from over here. Yer thinking that I'm a madman for bringing ye here. Yer wondering how to tell me that ye want to leave me and get the fuck out of here."

I glance out the window, my brow hunching.

"Stop guessing at what I'm thinking. You're almost always wrong."

He snorts, his big hands gripping the wheel so tightly that his knuckles are growing white. “I didn’t hear a no anywhere in there, Persephone.”

I clear my throat, skipping over his questions. “I was thinking that we don’t have to go to this place. If you want to avoid it so badly—”

“We’re ten minutes away.” He studies me out of the corner of his eye. “If ye don’t want to go—”

“Hades!” I raise my voice, irked. “I have never been to this place. Just like I’ve never been any of the places that you’ve taken me to. I trust your judgement. I trust your gut telling me that we are going to be safe. The question is, do you trust yourself?”

He grimaces, gripping the steering wheel tighter. “Nae, I can’t say that I do. This place makes me feel like a sheep separated from his flock by a rainstorm. I have no idea what’s happening or where I am. I just have to seek higher ground and wait until the skies lighten again.”

I shoot him a perplexed glance. “I’ve got no idea what that is supposed to mean.”

He lifts a single shoulder. “Just that I hope that I am not the only man who is thrown off the scent by Whitewraith.”

I don’t quite know what to say to that, so I just nod slowly. As I’m pondering what exactly he meant, I look out the windshield, glancing away from the inky pool of black water just over my shoulder. I see the same brittle yellow grass and scattered large rocks here and there that have been whizzing by my window since we started this drive.

But then, I see it. *Whitewraith*.

It begins creeping up, the neat limestone walls of a castle rising against the darkened night sky. I reach out, my fingers digging into Hades’ forearm as we crest a hill. There, silhouetted like a ghost, are the shuttered gates of W.

Massive smooth white walls are forbidding. The immense wrought-iron gate is obviously padlocked. In the distance beyond that lies a huge compound made of limestone, though smudges of brown dirt running down the side give me pause. And now that we drive closer, there are vines growing wild all over the outer wall and ivy scaling the castle proper.

I’m not all together convinced that this isn’t some sort of abandoned fortress.

“Uhhh...” I say, unable to take my eyes off the ghostly castle. “Are you sure that people live here?”

It might be called a manor, but it's definitely a castle. All it is missing are the flying red buttresses and it could be plucked out of a fairytale.

I look over at Hades, who is glowering up at W. He slows as we approach, the tires crunching against the fresh white gravel of the road. Jerking his head, he nods toward where a clunky old SUV is parked a few hundred yards away from the gate.

When he pulls the car over on the other side of the gates, he frowns as he fishes something out of his jacket pocket. Plastic crinkles as he produces a square of photo paper, covered by a see-through protective envelope.

He hands it over casually, not making eye contact as he straightens his cuffs. I take the photo curiously, seeing that it is actually an old-fashioned souvenir photo. In the heart shaped inset, the castle looks crisp set against lush green grass, clumps of little white flowers, and two lovers sprawled on a blanket, nearly kissing. If I had to guess the date of this picture, I'd say 1970s, purely from how the young couple look in their bell-bottomed jeans and tight, ratty band t-shirts.

"Look at the back," Hades rumbles, getting out of the car.

I turn the photo over, realizing that it's meant to be a post card. The address is blank, but there is a note scrawled in the blank space.

My hometown, 1972.

My brow hunches. I get out of the car, arching a brow at Hades. "Is this some kind of riddle?"

He adjusts his tie and gives me a long look, plucking the photo from my fingers.

"It's the only thing my mam left me. I know where Whitewraithe is, of course. Everybody knows that it's probably the most haunted place in all of Scotland." He sucks his teeth. "It just so happens that Ma was raised here. And I'm pretty damn sure that this is where she came back to when she fled my father."

I blink at him, surprised. "So your mother may be here? This a whole castle full of your relatives?"

"Someone is here," he says, his expression dark as midnight. "But as for who, that's anyone's best guess. Uncle Malcolm will still be alive, if we are lucky."

I puff out my cheeks, peering up at the white wall just in front of us. Walking toward it, I reach out a hand and feel the coarse limestone

underneath my fingertips. To my surprise, it's quite cool to the touch and almost a little damp.

“Lass.”

I look back at Hades, swallowing tightly.

“I’m ready.”

I hold out a hand to him, smiling softly. He looks taken aback by the gesture, but he hurries to catch my hand in his. I curl my fingers against his and bolster myself as he guides me to the gates.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

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HADES

Knocking on the door of Whitewraithe Castle is an experience I'll never forget. I reach out my hand and Penny grasps it, calming my nerves. Still, my heart hammers against my ribs. I pound on the door again and step back, looking up at the huge piece of oak. Is nobody going to answer?

Is it possible that no one is home?

But no, there definitely are people here. I saw their cars when I pulled up just a few minutes ago.

The door open and produces a massive squeaking sound. I went and instinctively step in front of Persephone, shielding her from whatever lies just beyond the door.

I need and have worried though apparently. Mad does face is the first that I see on the other side. She gives me a brief, hard smile and then lights up when she sees Penny. Oh, you're okay! Thank God. I was worried about you.

My mother places a hand on my arm and then moves around me to give Penny a quick hug. Oh, thank God you're all right. I was very worried about you. It's good to see you looking so well.

She backs up, examining pennies pregnant belly.

I am fine. Tired, mostly. Your son saved me. Persephone grabs me by the crook of my arm and brings the attention back to me. I don't need her to mediate things between myself and my mother, but I'd give her a gracious smile anyway.

I have no illusion about the relationship with my mother. It's damaged beyond repair and the most I can do at this point is a little tidying at the edges. But it seems important to Penny that my mother be present. Plus,

there's a huge bonus in the fact that my mother can easily stand in for a midwife, should the need arise. And with pennies due date looming around the corner, it seems like a good idea to have a doctor at our beck and call.

Well, come in, my mother says. Don't send outside for too long. Call me your uncle well.

Ushering penny inside, I head into the castle. It's

Almost instantly, I see a man who must be my uncle; he is older, graying at the temples, but he looks like my mother around the eyes. He hastens forward and cloths my hand, his smile warm and genuine.

"Hello, nephew. It's been a long time since I've seen you.

My eyebrows fly up. I open my mouth to ask him exactly when he supposedly met me in the past. But he has already moved on. He has turned his case to Penny and marvels over her.

"What a treat that our boy brought you home. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Persephone."

"Thank you for having us, sir."

The older man's eyes crinkle. "Please, call me Uncle Will."

Penny blushes and lets him use an arm around her shoulders as he draws her down the hallway.

My mother looks at me arching a brow. Your brothers are already here.

They are? I ask.

Her mouth twitches. Apparently, you were the only one that Eros kept out of the loop because he and Aries have both been coming here for ages.

My heart squeezes in my chest. What?

Magda takes me by the elbow end walks placidly toward the main room. We enter a huge, bright Lee lit room that serves as a living area with a lot of couches and chairs. I spot both of my brothers sitting by the fireplace, each one looking like the cat that swallowed the canary.

Uncle Will stations Persephone in a chair and seems interested in catering to her every want or need. I eye him, uncertain of his intentions.

In the next second, he moves to reassure me.

"Whitewraithe Castle is yer home. If ye look back, ye can trace yer lineage all the way back to the very first clans to settle in these parts. And ye've done well to bring yer bride here. She'll be well cared-for and fiercely protected by every last man and woman while she brings new life into our little world."

Penny's eyebrows rise slightly. "We don't know how long we're going to stay. And... I hate to be the one to tell you, but we're not married."

I move closer to her, gripping her hand. Uncle Will turns to her, bowing.

"I understand, lass. But I'm offering ye a place to make yer own home. We would love it if ye stayed with us forever." His mouth creases into something resembling a smile. "And as for the second bit, just say the word. We'll have ye married the same day. All you have to do is let us know."

My neck heats. Marriage between me and Persephone is practically a given. But I haven't even talked to Penny about it, much less ordered a ring and considered how I would propose to her.

Penny jumps in, coming to my rescue. "That's not really on our radar, sir."

"Uncle Will," he corrects her gently. "Ye both love each other, do ye not?"

Penny looks up at me, her eyes narrowing on my face. I give her an encouraging smile.

"Of course. I have never loved anyone else, and I never will. We are stuck together, I think."

She blushes a little and squeezes my hand. Uncle Will crosses his arms.

"So it's settled, then. Ye just let me know the date and I'll have a priest come for the ceremony."

I open my mouth to respond, but Magda cuts in. "We can talk more about it later. Let William dote on Persephone for a little while, okay? Yer brothers are waiting to talk to ye."

Giving her a hard glare, I look down at Penny. "Are ye okay?"

She pats my hand and smiles before releasing me. "Go on, find out what Jekyll and Hyde want."

Smirking at that, I turn toward my brothers. "Ye heard the lass. What do ye want?"

Eros clears his throat and Ares rolls his eyes.

"Magda has made her expectations clear as crystal. We're supposed to have a serious talk about splitting up the company."

"And paying Hades his fair share," Magda adds. "He started the business, after all."

I glance at Penny, who is talking very earnestly with Uncle Will. He is couching down beside her chair and clasping her hand. She leans close and

seems at ease with him. I judge that she'll be safe here, especially if I station my mother at her side.

Giving Magda a hard look, I motion to my brothers. "Come on. Let's give Magda and Will and Penny time to get comfortable. We should go for a walk."

Ares and Eros clamber to their feet, making for the door. I stop and drop a kiss to Penny's head on my way out. She gives me a knowing look and blows me a kiss.

In the hallway, the second the door is closed behind me, Eros speaks.

"Well, go ahead. Tell him," he says, glancing at Ares.

Ares rolls his eyes. "Aye, aye. I've transferred all the funds back into your accounts, Hades."

My expression tightens. I can feel a prickle of tension spread across my shoulder blades. I just keep moving down the hallway. "I'm going to need you to say more."

I make it to the massive front door, stepping out into the salty air. The ocean makes its presence known, waves crashing distantly as I head toward the shore.

Ares clears his throat, following my footsteps.

"I was thinking that the two of us would take a smaller portion of the loot from our most recent adventure."

Shaking my head, I feel rage simmering in my veins. Now that Penny is no longer in sight, I stop and pin Ares in place with my gaze. He stops mid-step, looking a bit surprised.

"What?"

The itch to punch him is pronounced. My fists clench.

"What do ye mean, what?" I hiss.

Eros steps between us, ever the peace maker.

"I told ye he would still be angry, Ares," he says. "In the grand scheme of things, ye did kidnap his girlfriend."

Ares opens his mouth to defend himself and I explode, unable to listen to a second of him trying to reason with me.

"Ye didn't let go even though ye knew she was carrying my child! According to her, ye were going to ship her off to marry some friend of yers. Like I would just accept that, ye fucking idiot!" I grit my teeth, collecting myself enough to hiss out. "As far as I am concerned, ye still owe me. Ye always will."

“All right!” he thunders back. “I’m sorry. Okay? I owe ye!”

“God damn right you do. And ye need to apologize to Persephone too. She is the one ye really hurt.”

“He will apologize,” Eros says. When Ares grumbles, Eros punches him in the arm. “Shut up, ye unbelievable sack of shit. I think ye’d better set aside a trust for Hades’ son, too.”

“It’s a girl.” I cross my arms. “And I think that’s a grand idea. How about you start it with all your earnings from the last job?”

Ares grimaces. “Yer killing me, Hades.”

“It’s better than actually killing ye, which was my first impulse.”

He throws his hands up. “Fine! Jaysus. Ye can have it. I was just trying to do what our father would have done. He would have taken any deal if it had offered him enough money.”

Glancing out over the landscape, I try to pull my thoughts together.

“I’ll say it, if ye need to hear in. Da was a fucking coward. Hearing Magda’s side of the story really brings that home. Ye shouldn’t try to be anything like him. We are better than our father ever was.”

Ares slides a glance at Eros. Eventually, he sighs. “Aye.”

Silence stretches between us for half a minute. Eros breaks it, giving me a hard look.

“So yer out. If ye’ll have no more to do with the arms dealing business, what comes next?”

I shrug and cast my gaze out, over the horizon.

“Being with Persephone will have its own share of challenges, I imagine. Neither of us is perfect. And trying to add a baby to the mix can only complicate matters.” I scrunch up my face. “I do love her, though.”

“Enough to make her a Lyon?” Eros asks.

I let out a bark of laughter. “Enough to do anything she wants. And I expect ye both to get with the fucking program. Or I will take the necessary steps to make sure that ye don’t make trouble for us ever again.”

“Ye can count me in.” Eros steps close and claps me on the back.

Ares looks at the ground but nods his head. “Aye. Same for me.”

He draws a small black velvet box out of his pocket and offers it to me. Pursing my lips, I take it, opening it to reveal a small diamond beset by emeralds in an antique ring. My eyebrows fly up and I look at Ares.

“For Persephone.” He squints, avoiding eye contact. “It was Ma’s. She left it at home when she fled. I found it and kept it, thinking that I would be

the first one to need it.”

“It turns out that banging women in the bathrooms of bars doesn’t exactly earn ye a wife,” Eros says with a grin.

Ares punches him without looking and Eros lets out a sigh.

I examine the ring. “You think that Penny would like it?”

“What the fuck do I know about what women like?” Ares snaps. “I just thought that maybe if ye were serious about making her your wife, ye’d like Ma’s ring to do it with.”

“It’s touching, really,” Eros teases him.

“Shut the fuck up.”

Closing the ring box with a snap, I give Ares a long look. He avoids my gaze and looks off into the distance, brooding.

Raising the ring box at him, I shake it in his direction. “This doesn’t make us even, ye know. Not even close.”

He shrugs a shoulder. I stare him down for a few more beats before I tuck the box in my pocket.

“Thanks,” I say. “I think Penny will like it.”

“Whatever.” He acts nonchalant, but I can tell that there is the undercurrent of strong emotion there. “Don’t tell her it’s from me, maybe.”

Squinting out across the landscape, I let out a sigh that I’ve been holding in for a long time. I spread my arms, placing my hands on my brothers’ backs. I know that it’s more contact than we are used to but I stay still. They both give me a sideways glance, waiting.

When I don’t shrink back, Eros clears his throat.

“I’d say we deserve a drink.”

He turns, heading back toward the castle. I cast a measuring gaze over Ares but he just shrugs.

“To the future,” he mutters.

He follows Eros. After a moment, I do too.

This is as good as it gets with the Lyon men. I’ll take it, too.

My thoughts turn to Penny and my heart clenches, my feet carrying me onward.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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PERSEPHONE

Eight days.

I am eight days past my due date.

Eight miserable days. My daughter is apparently enjoying my nice, toasty oven. And for most of my pregnancy, I was happy to have her growing inside me. But I'm done now.

“Done!” I groan, although there is no one to hear me whine.

It's Saturday morning and I lie on the couch, the only place I can even be vaguely comfortable. I'm wearing nothing but a fluffy white bathrobe, because I honestly just could not put on clothes today.

I glance at the muted television and then at my phone screen. Hades is still on a long hike with his Uncle Will. At Will's request, they are spending some quality time, just the two of them.

I think it's great that Hades is doing something so active...

But I definitely can't go on a hike with him. I haven't even seen my feet in so long it's almost laughable. Actually, like all things, it brings tears to my eyes.

The baby kicks me. It's not a random thing anymore. She's gotten so big that anytime she shifts even slightly, she does the merengue with my bladder.

I narrow my eyes at my stomach, which is so big now I look like I'm going to literally pop.

“Must be nice to live in such style and comfort,” I gripe at the baby. “Seriously, I'm doing everything I can here to get you out. I've eaten spicy foods. I've swallowed castor oil. I've walked a mile, which is pretty good

for my condition... I promise, we are going to get you out as soon as we can.”

The baby kicks me again, hitting one of my ribs. “Ow!”

Just for that, I decide to heft myself up off of the couch and go to the kitchen. I snag a jar of individually packaged pieces of dark chocolate, helping myself to one. For the first half of my pregnancy I had zero cravings and was on my best behavior, food-wise. But now I happily unwrap and savor a square of chocolate because let’s face it, I definitely deserve a little comfort food.

As the dark, bittersweet flavor melts on my tongue, Hades comes in the front door. He’s in his hiking gear, a big black hoodie, a t-shirt, and gray hiking shorts. His muscles bunching underneath the too-tight hoodie and I can’t help but notice. I hate how he is still as attractive as ever and I am reduced to looking like a python that’s swallowed a beach ball.

He grins when he sees me. “Hello, beautiful.”

Hades swoops into the den, kissing me on the neck, rubbing his unshaven chin against my bare skin. I bite my lip; it hurts, kind of, but it’s also a turn on.

It’s been a while since I felt horny... a couple of weeks. Maybe I should just seize this moment...

He turns into the hall, heading back toward the bedroom. I follow him, feeling a little abashed by my suddenly needy body. I watch his ass in those shorts as he goes into the bedroom.

Yeah, I am definitely horny.

“Hey,” I say, already blushing.

He turns around, quirking a brow. “Yes?”

I close the door behind us, steeling myself.

“I thought maybe—” I say, turning crimson. I sit down on the bed, beckoning him. “You know... you could... um...”

He looks at me funny. “What?”

“Have sex with me?” I ask.

He scrunches his face up. “Won’t it hurt the baby?”

“No way. I asked the obstetrician. It’s okay as long as I want it.”

Hades doesn’t need any more than that. He’s already pulling off his jacket and tossing it aside.

“Fuck yes,” he says, grinning. “I’ve been hard for you for weeks now.”

He moves to the bed, his eyes telling me just what he intends to do with me. I sit up straight and reach up to him; he kisses me eagerly, nudging me back onto the bed. He kneels over me, his lips roaming to my neck, my collar bone, my exquisitely tender breasts.

“Ohhhh,” I breathe.

He works a finger beneath the sash of my robe, undoing the rough knot. He carefully pushes the cotton aside, baring my body to him.

I feel shy, my hands covering my huge baby bump, but he’s having none of that. He grabs both of my hands, pinning them above my head, looking down at me.

“Do you even know how fucking hot ye are?” he asks. He kisses my lips slowly. “I’ve dreamed of this. Jacked off in the shower to the thought of yer sweet little mouth. I’ve wanted ye so bad the last couple of weeks, Penny.”

Hades releases my hands, looking at my pink nipples. My breasts are full to the point of being funny. But he looks at me, maintaining eye contact as he takes a nipple in his mouth. I squirm; his tongue abrading my nipple feels so damn good.

He moves his lips from my nipple back up to my mouth. I growl with sudden impatience, pushing him to the side a little so I can get my robe off.

“Jaysus,” he says, his eyes fastened on my breasts. He reaches out with one hand and cups the heaviness of my breast. “Yer tits have literally never looked more amazing than they do right now. They’re so fucking perfect.”

“You’re wearing too many layers,” I say, tugging at his shirt.

He pauses for a second, then backs up, taking his shirt off. Then he takes about three seconds to kick off his hiking boots and strip off the rest of his clothes. I’ve never been so glad to see my own boyfriend’s cock as I am in this moment when he shoves his boxer briefs off.

Hades stands there for a second, stroking his rock-hard cock, looking at me. And I stare right back at him; he’s all lean flesh and muscle, dark hair and stubble. I’m not sure how I got so lucky, having such a man’s man want *me*, but I don’t question it.

“How are we going to do this?” he asks speculatively, looking at me. “I don’t want to hurt the baby.”

“You won’t,” I promise. I bite my lip suggestively and turn over, putting my ass in the air. It takes everything I’ve got to balance myself with my pregnant stomach, but he doesn’t have to know that.

He growls and falls over me, stopping himself with an arm. He kisses the back of my neck and I shiver. Hades' hands cup my hips, and he kisses me on the lower back.

"Mmmm," I sigh. He peels off my underwear, leaving me bare before him.

Excitement skitters down my spine as his big hands shape my ass, and he reaches between my legs. I suck in a breath as he finds my clit with two fingers. It feels so incredibly good, I grind against his hand.

"Ah, lass," he sighs. "Fuck. The sight of ye turned on makes me so fucking hard, I don't know if I can take it."

I look back at him, blushing at the dirty tone of his voice. I'm so horny and his voice rough and ready, promising that he's about to do filthy things to me.

God, yes.

"Yes," I say. "You know what would be better, though?"

"Yer sweet pussy?" He just grins and slips his two fingers into my pussy. "Fuck. Yer so wet, lass."

"So fuck me already," I say, pushing my ass back against his hand.

"Jaysus, I love when ye say that."

Hades withdraws, fisting his cock and positioning it near my entrance. He notches his head against my pussy, going oh so very slow. He only gets the head in before he starts to curse.

"Fuck," he says. "God damn, it's been too long since I've had ye."

"Oh, god," I moan, clutching the sheets. "I need you so bad. *Please.*"

He slides home, filling me up all the way. I've never been quite so full, but I feel that in the best way possible. My inner walls contract and it just feels amazing.

"Don't stop," I moan, gripping the comforter. "Please, Hades, please keep going."

I feel him hesitate, so I encourage him.

"Yes," I say as he withdraws and begins to plunge back in. "Right there, but *harder.*"

He starts up a steady rhythm of thrusting and reaches around to my front. Hades begins strumming my clit, which sends waves of sensation through my body. I start moaning, using one hand to tweak my own nipple.

"Fuck, lass," Hades groans. "I'm not going to last long."

"Then do it harder," I whisper. "Fuck me like you mean it."

I try to zone out. It's not hard, between Hades' thrusts and his clever fingers on my clit. I close my eyes and concentrate on the orgasm building inside me. With each thrust, I get closer until suddenly I shatter, crying out Hades' name.

He comes just after me, his breathing ragged. I sag, losing the will to hold up my body any longer. Hades chuckles and kisses my lower back before he withdraws.

Then he pulls me onto my side, spooning me. I sigh dramatically and he chuckles.

“What?” I ask.

He keeps chuckling. “Nothing. I just didn’t think that would happen again for a while. I figured ye would have the baby and then ye would be too busy with her to pay me any mind.”

“Aww,” I say, reaching back blindly to pat his cheek. “It’s funny that you think you are somehow exempt from baby duty. When in fact, you are going to have to change twice as many diapers and get up twice as often as I do.”

“If that seems equitable to ye. I guess yer in charge now, aren’t ye?”

“I gave her life and nourished her with my body for nine months. After I give birth, it’ll be your turn,” I tease.

He laughs. “We’ll see. I’ll definitely take my turn. But Magda and Uncle Will have been awaiting her arrival too.”

I nuzzle the nape of his neck, sighing contentedly. The baby squirms inside my belly, viciously attacking my kidneys.

“Oof,” I gasp.

Hades puts his hand over my belly, feeling her wiggle. It seems like she knows his touch, because soon she stops trying to attack me and goes quiet. She always does that when he intervenes.

I sigh, thankful for some peace. “Do you think that means she’s going to be a daddy’s girl?”

I can hear the grin in his voice. “She’d better be.”

“Hopefully she decides to arrive soon. I’m really ready.”

“Hmm.” He’s quiet for a few seconds. “I was thinking about names.”

With a great deal of difficulty, I turn onto my back and look at him. He keeps his hand spread out over the top of my belly, which makes me feel close to him in a way I can’t quite describe. “Is this about how you like the name Elodie again? Because I am not raising a Elodie.”

“Actually,” he wrinkles his face up. “I was thinking of Maggie. After Magda, but less Scottish. More up to date.”

My eyes go wide. “Really?”

“You don’t like it?” he guesses.

I shake my head.

“No, I don’t like it. I *love* it,” I say.

Chuckling, he brushes a kiss over the top of my head. “All right. That’s a keeper, I think. That means that we almost have everything set for the birth.”

I tilt my head. “Almost? I thought that we settled the whole issue of Magda not being in the delivery room.”

“That’s still the case. The delivery room is your battle ground,” He assures me. “There is really only one thing that we have missed.”

Crinkling up my nose, I count things off. “Let’s see. I packed my bag. You have the route planned. I have a birthing plan. We have Uncle Will and Magda on alert...”

Hades stretches a little, then reaches over to his bedside table. He digs around for a second. I frown.

“Hades, what am I forgetting?”

When he gets up and drops to one knee, I am flabbergasted. Hades produces a black velvet ring box this time, cracking it open. A small diamond in a vintage ring sits within. My heart starts pounding.

“Do ye want to sit up for this?” he asks.

Instantly my eyes mist over. I push myself up with a great deal of effort, coming to sit on the side of the bed. “Oh, Hades—”

“Shhh.” He gives me a stern look. “Let me at least ask you, lass.”

He holds out his hand to me. When I slip my hand into his, he squeezes it. Hades takes a deep breath, looking at me with his dark, intense gaze.

“Penny. Ye’ve been a constant in my life. And for the last year, ye have brought me so much happiness. Ye’ve brought me to my knees. Ye forced me to admit that I am love with ye. Not just that, but ye are about to bring our daughter into the world. Will you become a Lyon and be my wife?”

My free hand covers my heart. I begin to cry. “Hades...”

He entwines our fingers. “Yer not going to say no, are ye?”

I give my head a tiny shake. “No. I would never.”

His eyebrows rise. “So... that’s a yes?”

I nod enthusiastically, trying not to be overcome by my tears. “God, yes.”

He slides his body between my knees, hugging me. “You are not going to regret it, lass. I swear to you.”

I laugh even though I’m crying. “I know, Hades.”

He pulls back, plucking the ring from the box. Its gold band feels cool as he slides the ring onto my finger. It stops only halfway up because my fingers are swollen. He wrinkles his nose.

“Maybe when the baby comes,” he says gently.

I just pull him close, kissing him soundly. The kiss is all the things I want it to be: intense and passionate, knowing and hungry, kind and wild. When I break away, breathless, I whisper against his lips.

“I love you, Hades Lyon. I will always love you.”

His lips curve against mine. “I love you too, lass. I will love you for the rest of my life.”

I’m crying again, but it doesn’t matter. I have everything I need, right here, right now.

Forever.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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PERSEPHONE

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Four months later

Blowing out a breath, I try to calm myself down. It shouldn't be that big of a deal; I'm marrying Hades, the man I have a baby with. It's all very logical and practical.

But a romantic part of me is still completely freaking out.

There's a knock on my bedroom door. I clear my throat and check my reflection in the mirror one last time. An elegant woman in white silk looks back at me, her vacant expression echoing what I feel.

"Penny?" Magda's voice comes through the door. "Are ye ready, dear?"

I blow out one final breath and smile at myself in the mirror. I only have to pull it together for an hour. Then I can fall apart.

"Coming!" I yell. I hurry to the door and swing it wide, finding Magda on the other side. She looks rather refined in dove gray silk and she bounces baby Maggie on one hip.

The second I see Maggie dressed in a frilly baby pink outfit, my eyes mist over. "Well, don't you both just look amazing."

Maggie makes a soft noise of want, reaching her chubby arms out wide to me. I stretch my hands out automatically and Maggie grins, looking utterly delighted. She lets out a shriek and I wince, but I'm already smiling.

Magda clucks her tongue, picking up one of Maggie's hands and grinning. "We both came to tell you that we are about ready. The boys are congregating outside by the cliff overlooking the sea. The castle servants are heading out there and the priest is waiting. So now, we just need you."

I take a deep breath, fanning my face to keep my eyes dry so they won't mess up my makeup. Maggie reaches out and touches my braided updo and I have to be quick to pull her hand away.

"No thank you. I don't need any more help with my hair, thank you." I swing and bounce her. She smiles, all dimples. She is a happy baby, for which I am endlessly thankful.

"How is Hades doing?"

Magda pulls me out into the hallway, ushering me through the castle.

"He's fine, as far as I can tell. Ye know how he is with me. We are getting closer, but he still hides ninety percent of his feelings when I'm around."

“But is he like...” I wince. “I’m just trying to make sure that he hasn’t changed his mind.”

Magda lets out a bark of laughter.

“Gods, no. My son is completely in love with ye. If it were a hundred years ago, I’d think ye had cast a witch’s spell over him.” She winks. “He knows what he’s got.”

I actually get choked up, just thinking about Hades. I fan my eyes.

“Shoot. I absolutely can’t cry. My emotions are just all over the damn place today.”

She opens the door then stops to give me a hug. “That’s perfectly acceptable. I would think ye were a bit odd if you weren’t acting a little off today. After all, you are about become Penny Lyon. It’s a huge change!”

I exhale slowly, fanning my eyes again. “Magda, please don’t make me cry.”

Maggie puts her hand against my face, and I move my head, kissing her little fingers.

Magda bites her lip. “So no speeches about how damn glad I am that my son has the sense to marry ye?”

I tear up, hugging Magda hard. “After the ceremony, okay?”

She wipes at her own eyes and laughs a little. “Deal.”

She holds out her hand. “Come on. Let’s not keep the man of yer dreams waiting.”

I navigate the next couple of minutes as though moving through a fog. I don’t quite know how I get to the clearing on the top of the cliff. But sudden we are there, me and Maggie. I look at the small cluster of handsome men standing there, waiting for us.

Magda gives me a little push and I start walking toward them. I swallow and search for Hades’ face.

My gaze catches his. He looks so smart standing at the end of the aisle in his blue and gold kilt, his crisp white shirt, his black waistcoat, and his black bowtie. Just a glance at him and he takes my breath away.

Magda murmurs in my ear. “Here, let me take the baby.”

I let her take Maggie. My eyes are only for Hades. Looking at him makes me breathless with happiness.

I’m here to become his wife.

He chose me.

That fact has me overwhelmed already and not a single word has been exchanged yet.

I run the last couple of steps, right into Hades' arms. He catches me, grinning.

"You look..." He bites his lower lip. "Radiant."

I blush. "Thank you. You look so handsome and distinguished."

He smirks down at me, then leans close to whisper in my ear. "You should probably step back. Everyone is waiting."

Turning a vibrant pink, I step back. The priest stands between Hades and I, looking at both of us with something like contentment.

"Are you ready to begin?"

I nod, eager to have the ceremony bit over with. The priest clears his throat.

"We are gathered here today to witness the union of Hades and Penny. Today is the beginning of a remarkable journey for this couple. Drawing on their mutual admiration, respect, and trust, they are ready to embark on the next chapter in their lives."

He pauses for a second, then continues.

"I will now invite the couple to share their vows with one another. Hades and Penny, the promises you make today are sacred; they are the groundwork from which your marriage will grow and blossom over time."

I beam at Hades. It's hard to tell, but there is definitely an undercurrent of emotion running through his eyes.

"Hades, would you like to begin first?" the priest asks.

Hades clears his throat. When he speaks, his voice is rough.

"Penny, today ye will become my wife. A Lyon. I thought that I would trek this world forever without ever knowing love. But then..."

He cuts off, swallowing, before he continues.

"I found you. And in all the ways that matter, you saved me. I promise to love you with all my heart, from now until eternity. I promise to give you and our daughter everything that I ever lacked as a child. And I promise that I will always be there for you."

I start crying sometime during that statement. My heartbeat races and it's all I can do not to hide my face and sob. The priest smiles at me.

"Penny, your turn."

I suck in a wavering breath. "Hades, today you will become my husband. I thought that my chance to be happy had come and gone. When I

met you, I hated you. Hated what I thought you stood for. How wrong I was. And I'm so glad to be giving you and Maggie all my love, for the rest of my life."

I suck in a breath.

"I promise to love you with all my heart, from now until eternity. I cannot wait to begin building our life together."

The priest smiles. "Hades and Penny, it's time to join hands."

We join hands, clutching at one another, gazing at each other. For me, Hades is the only star in the night sky. The priest's voice floats down to my ears, disembodied.

"Hades, do you take Penny as your beloved wife, to have and to hold, through laughter and in sadness, through challenges and successes, so long as you both shall live?"

Hades' gaze bores into mine. I swear, I see a hint of tears when he utters his oath. "I do."

"Penny, do you take Hades as your beloved husband, to have and to hold, through laughter and in sadness, through challenges and successes, so long as you both shall live?"

"I do!" I squeak, wishing madly that I wasn't crying in front of Hades' whole family. They'll have to forgive me though, because Hades is mine.

Now and forever.

The priest pulls out the rings, each in one of his hands.

"A ring for each of you," he announces.

There are a few moments of fumbling, putting rings on fingers and grinning through tears.

The priest nods and holds up his hands, making a declaration. "Hades and Penny, I happily pronounce you husband and wife. Hades, you may now kiss the bride."

Hades slides his hand along my cheek and cups the back of my head, lowering his mouth to mine.

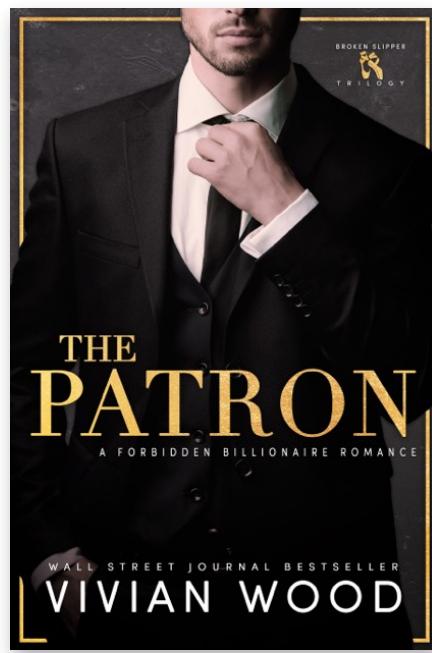
I make a soft sound as his lips touch mine; he tastes sweet and clean, like fresh mint. When his mouth opens and his tongue touches mine, sweeping the inside of my mouth, I put my arms around his neck and plow my hands into the back of his hair.

He sweeps me off my feet, kissing me all the while, as all our friends and family rise and cheer. And I feel safe in the knowledge that I'm in his arms, right where I should be, right where I will be for the rest of my life.

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KAIA

“One, two, three, four,” Melanie, our instructor counts off. She speaks in a high pitched, nasal voice. The piano music starts once again. “Girls! Group one, move forward. And one, two, three... *pir-ou-ette*. Now *pir-ou-ette*... good, good.”

Her lilting Irish voice is set to the rhythm. As one, the group ahead of me neatly spins on their tiptoes, executing flawless pirouettes. The whole room is mirrored, floor to ceiling, with a sturdy wooden barre bolted to every inch. With the mirror, it looks like twenty four perfect ballerinas are finishing their pirouettes.

It makes sense, because this class is the best of the best. The most dedicated ballerinas and danseurs, the ones who have given up regular school and any semblance of their social lives to be here. After most would-be dancers are bounced from the program for not following the rules or just plain not being good enough, this is what you have left.

The *hardcore* dancers. I’ve worked my ass off to be in this final class.

I suck in a breath and stretch my neck, readying myself for my group.

Melanie claps along on a steady, brisk four count. “Next group! And one, two, three... *pir-ou-ette*. And *pir-ou-ette*...”

My arms swoop out to the sides as I lift onto my tiptoes and twirl. The motion is automatic, one born of muscle memory more than anything else. I’m directing most of my attention at my feet and the slight curve in my back. I usually get in trouble for my feet not pointing enough or my back not having a slight bow in it if I’m not intensely concentrated.

“Kaia! There should be more arch to your arms!” Melanie admonishes me. I give my arms a little more lift and she bows her head quickly. “There

you go.”

I don’t have time to look around at the twelve other ballerinas in my group. I’m focused entirely on my feet and my back and the position of my arms. When I finish though, I realize that I’ve stopped very close to Manon, a little brunette ballerina who shoots me a glare.

I’m quick to move away, straightening my spine. Out of every ballerina in this school, Manon is by far the most caustic. And usually, her barbs are aimed at me.

“Sylvie! Don’t start like that, how can you expect to be graceful if you start in such an ugly position?” Melanie calls, her expression stern. She tucks a strand of her dishwater blonde hair behind her ear, rolling her eyes. “Boys! Group one, forward please... And one, two, three... *pir-ou-ette*. And *pir-ou-ette*... Mason, that was perfect.”

I glance to my right, catching myself in the mirror. A thin blonde ballerina stares back at me, wearing a lilac leotard, a filmy white dancer’s skirt, opaque white tights, and ballet pink pointe shoes. I bite my lip and send my image a tiny frown; I immediately see the glaring flaws in my own appearance.

My father’s voice echoes through my head.

Your hair is the wrong shade of blonde. Your nose is too big, your eyes are too far apart. You’re too tall to do ballet, too heavy for most dancers to lift. Your posture is imperfect. Your feet are too large.

I swallow and lift my chin. I have to overcome my obvious shortfalls, be resilient enough to make it as a dancer. My dad put me through ballet academy and he has certain expectations.

If I work hard, if I focus all my energy on each and every move, I should be able to prevail.

But by far the worst thing of all is that I lack mobility in my turnout. The rotation of my hip joints, to turn outward away from the front of my body, is sadly never going to be a perfect one hundred and eighty degrees.

I wrinkle my nose at myself and drag my eyes back up to the rest of the class. I see my group moving forward again and I rush to take my place. We execute another set of pirouettes under Melanie’s eagle-eyed gaze.

“Ella, you are still a step behind everyone else. Always a step behind. Start earlier.”

The incredibly tiny black woman blushes and bows her head, but says nothing. I would kill for Ella’s diminutive height or turnout, but I am

incredibly glad not to get that same bit of criticism from our teacher.

“Let’s change it up,” Melanie says. She turns around, signaling to the piano player to stop. “This will be the last combination. Girls, please begin with relevé développé, pas de bourré, arabesque en diagonal, tombé, and demi-plié. Okay? Let’s go.”

The hardest part of my day is right now, when we’ve already had an full day of classes and we only have a few minutes more. The last fifteen minutes always seem to drag terribly.

We go through the combination two more times, with Melanie correcting everything she sees. Don’t get me wrong, I know that she’s one of our most kind hearted teachers. But by the time the class ends, I’m done with her critiques.

Honestly, I could probably use a day off right about now. But between attending my last month of classes here at the New York Academy of Ballet and my much less prestigious night job, there’s a snowball’s chance in hell of that randomly happening.

I walk over to grab my bottle of water, taking a long pull. As I’m guzzling down the water, Eric walks up. I gulp as he casually starts talking to me; with his blonde hair, clear blue eyes, and his muscular danseur’s frame, Eric looks like a freaking Disney prince.

“Hey,” he says, picking up a small black duffel bag from against the wall. “That last round of combinations was killer. I feel like I just got my ass kicked.”

Before I even say a word, my face grows hot. As a ballerina, I’m always sensitive to my body and the story told by my posture. But talking to gorgeous Eric brings a whole new level of embarrassment and self consciousness.

I give him a shy smile. “Yeah, especially the last one. That relevé développé sliding into that pas de bourrée was really tricky.”

Eric nods, digging through his duffel bag. “I think that move is featured pretty heavily in The Nutcracker. So if we have any hope of getting picked for any ballet company, I guess that’s a move we really have to nail.” He pulls his water bottle out of his bag and takes a swig.

As he drinks, I look at the way his head is thrown back. His throat arches, his whole body effortlessly shifting to balance. I watch the motion of Eric swallowing, my eyes tracing the path of the water moving down his throat.

Will he ever ask me out? I wonder.

I've never been on a date or had a boyfriend, but I have definitely had the hots for Eric for years.

He snaps the lid closed on his water bottle and catches my longing expression. He arches an eyebrow. "What?"

My face goes red and I turn away from him, heading toward my own duffel bag. I fib a little. "Did you know that I can get extra life out of my pointe shoes by using floor wax? I dab a little inside the box, put the shoes in a preheated oven that's been turned off. When I take them out and let them cool overnight, they feel better and last longer."

He squints at me. "You are really thrifty, Kaia."

I am. I have to be.

There is no magical force out there, guiding me toward making money. Just me, trying to scrimp and save and cut corners to get by.

I flush, looking down at my hands.

Eric continues on, as if I had never started off on a weird money saving tangent. "I'm just wondering about what company I'll end up in. Imagine if we both got accepted to the New York Ballet."

Manon is standing by the wall where my bag is. As I approach, she turns around, her lip curling into a delicate sneer.

"There is no way that Kaia will be chosen by the NYB. They only recruit five graduates from every ballet academy in the world each year. You just..." Her eyes scan my body, a smirk appearing on her lips. "Don't measure up. You should apply for Cincinnati or Birmingham or somewhere that they need second rate ballerinas, honestly."

My heart drops toward my feet. I open my mouth to return her snarky comment, but Ella walks over, inserting herself in the situation. Ella refuses to let anybody talk to her or her friends with disrespect... and I'm lucky enough that she has adopted me as one of her besties.

Whatever that means for ballerinas, anyway.

"Shut the fuck up, Manon. Don't you have a broomstick somewhere to polish up before the next full moon?" she says, making shooing motions with her hands. Her Southern accent is thick as molasses and twice as syrupy-sweet.

Manon's lips twist. "Go back to whatever hillbilly town you're from. Leave the rest of the world alone."

“First of all, I’m from Marietta, which is a suburb of Atlanta. And second, you’d better watch your mouth before I clean it out with a fucking bar of soap.” Ella says.

“Ugh, bitch.” Manon storms off, disappearing through the studio door. I look at Ella, beyond grateful.

“Thanks,” I say, shaking my head. “You always have the best retorts. I wish I was more like that.”

Ella squeezes my upper arm. “Everybody does, boo.”

She slides her gaze to Eric, her gaze tightening just a little. She doesn’t completely approve of Eric for some reason and makes that pretty clear.

“Don’t you have somewhere else to be?” she asks.

Eric gives her an odd look. “It’s late Saturday afternoon. We’re done with practice for the day. Where is it exactly that you think I should go?”

Ella puts her hand on her hip and rolls her eyes. She turns her attention back to me. “I’m going to see a play tonight. Any interest in attending?”

I wrinkle my nose and pull off my point shoes. “I can’t. I have to work. Raincheck?”

“Sure,” she says with a shrug.

Ella pulls a pair of dark sweatpants out of her duffel bag, quickly swapping her white skirt for the pants. I unwrap my laces and pull off my shoes. Eric is pulling on a pair of pants and a tight ivory sweater.

For a minute, the studio is quiet, the sound of everyone changing and moving out of the room dominating the space.

Ella pulls her pink fleece jacket on over her white leotard and then pulls her duffel bag strap onto her shoulder. I zip my jeans, shove my feet into my pink Converse, and pull a dark oversized fleece jacket on my body.

As soon as I shoulder my bag, Ella starts gently ushering me towards the door. “Hey, speaking of the auditions for the New York Ballet. Did you guys get a casting call in the mail?”

Eric nods, following us. “Yeah. The audition dates for people from our academy are the first through the fourth of next month.”

My hands tighten on the strap of my duffel bag. I look down the long hallway lined with rehearsal rooms and instructor’s offices, toward the white metal door at the very end. “I can’t believe that we are less than a month away from auditions,” I confess.

Eric snorts. “I auditioned for San Francisco last week. We are firmly within audition season, I think.”

"I did Atlanta two weeks ago," Ella adds. "It was nice to get to see my folks. I didn't want them to realize that I will choose Atlanta as a last resort, though. I've got my eyes on someplace here in New York."

"Yeah, I really want to stay here," I say, nodding. "I'm actually only applying to a few places."

Eric shakes his head and hikes his duffel bag up on his arm. "I applied to ten companies. I want options."

I reach the doorway at the end of the hall first. Shouldering it open, I shiver against the cool New York City fall. As I hold the door for Ella and Eric, I glance at the soon to be setting sun where it peeks out from a gap between two towering skyscrapers.

The three of us walk toward the busy sidewalk. At this hour, the streets of Manhattan are packed with people of every description. Every color, every gender, every sexual orientation. It makes me breathe a little easier.

In New York City, I have a lot more anonymity and autonomy than I could ever have found if I'd just stayed in buttoned up, privileged Hartford. That's where my family is from and probably one of my least favorite places on the planet.

I heave a sigh as we all begin to head our separate ways.

"I'll catch you guys later," I say, shooting Eric and Ella both a little smile.

"Have fun working at the laundromat," Eric says, lifting a hand in a wave.

My cheeks stain red again. I definitely don't work at a laundromat. That's just the first thing that came to mind when Eric first asked me about my job. "Thanks," I manage.

"Bye," Ella says, already moving away.

I turn and start walking quickly toward the closest subway station. Pulling my cell phone out to check the time, I see that I've missed three calls from home. Sucking in a deep breath, I realize that I don't have time to call my father back. That causes a ripple of unease to slide down my spine.

My father doesn't have the best temperament when I am at his beck and call; when I miss his phone calls, he morphs into a sinister, dark character with a serious anger problem.

But I absolutely cannot be late for work. I need this job too much to screw around and get fired. Maybe if I am very lucky, I'll be able to call my dad back while I make the quick trip from the station to the club...

Chewing on my lower lip, I shove my phone into my duffel bag and hurry down the steps to the subway.

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CALUM

I throw open the door to my penthouse loft, peering down at a young brunette. In her black pencil skirt, white button up blouse, and black peacoat, she's dressed for the office. Her dark hair is pinned up in a messy bun and she clutches several binders and file folders to her chest.

"Hi," she says, smiling a little breathlessly. "Mr. Fordham?"

I lean out of the doorway, glancing around at the neat white waiting room. If I was hoping for some sign of who this girl is, I'm disappointed. There is no one else with her except the closing doors of the elevator.

"How did you get up here?" I ask.

Her cheeks color. "I asked the man at the front desk to allow me to bring you some things from work."

I stare at her, trying to puzzle out what exactly she means. I feel caught off guard and a little bit underdressed; I make it a rule to wear a full three piece suit everywhere but here at my home and at dance rehearsal.

When I don't answer right away, she blushes and tucks her hair behind her ear. "Maybe you don't recognize me. I'm Amy? I work as a personal assistant at Indica Tech corporate. I'm one of your PAs."

I breathe out through my nose, my lips twisting. "Is there a reason you are bothering me at my home, Amy?"

She sucks in a breath. "I brought you the sales reports. They took longer than I thought, so you'd already left the office by the time they were done. And I know that they carry sensitive information, so..." She flashes a timid smile. "Here I am."

I arch a brow. Amy's story is bullshit. There were at least four people that I already know that she could have given a report to. So her being here

is for some other reason.

Eying her up and down, I heave a sigh. Backing up, I wave her into the foyer of my apartment. “Come in.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear again and gives me a wide-eyed look. It’s tinged with a little longing.

Ah. That’s why she’s here. Why she broke several rules at work just to be strolling in my front door right now.

I smirk a little. Amy wants to catch my eye. She wants me to kiss her, to seduce her. Hell, she probably wants a big fucking ring on top of all that.

It’s what women seem to want from me ever since my business went public at a hundred dollars a share.

I don’t bother to close the front door. Instead, I stick out a hand and cock my head. “Well?”

Amy swallows, her eyes darting toward the sleek, dark furnishings of the next room. She fumbles around, producing a sheaf of papers.

I snatch them from her hand, giving the top sheet a cursory examination. Amy rocks on her feet a little nervously, glancing again at the living room.

“Do you mind if I just put my things down so I can fix my heel?” she asks.

I narrow my eyes on her face, folding the sheaf of paper in half. “If you must.”

She hurries into my expansive, elegant living room with some awe. Everything in this room looks expensive because it is; made of teakwood and dark leather, the furniture in here practically shouts *I’m wealthy*.

Amy collapses on a couch as I follow her into the room. I cross my arms and shoot her a little glare. She pushes the binders a little ways away from her on the couch, pulling one of her shoes off.

She looks up at me as she massages her foot. “Thanks for letting me sit, Mr. Fordham. Or do you prefer Calum?”

I squint at her. “Whatever gets you the fuck out of here the fastest.”

She blushes. “You’re too much, Calum! I can’t believe I’m in your house. If you’d asked me this morning, I’d have told you that you were crazy.”

Her words strike the wrong note for me. Either she’s smart and she’s been planning this for a long time... or she’s dumb and just an opportunist.

She's either dishonest or sloppy. Neither of which I find particularly appealing in the women I sleep with.

Just like that, the decision is made. I'm not going to entertain this woman tonight.

I whip out my phone, sending a text to my brother, who is already on his way here anyway. Then I give Amy a cold little smile.

"You're either a liar or a slob," I say, enunciating every word. "Either way, you fucked things up. Bringing this report here without checking in with your supervisors was extremely risky, Amy."

"Oh, I didn't mean to say—"

I cut her off with a sharp shake of my head. "I don't know what you were hoping to get out of coming to my house and invading my space. Maybe you just wanted to see the inside of your billionaire boss's home. Maybe your motivations are more nefarious." I shrug my shoulders. "Either way, I think it's safe to say you made an error."

Her chin wobbles. Her big brown eyes are wide and brimming with tears.

Seeing her reaction just makes me angrier. I pace around her in circles, shoving a hand through my dark undercut hair.

"Mr. Fordham, if you will just let me explain," she says. Her voice sounds breathy; any moment now, she will burst into tears.

It makes me hate her. Her presumptive, weakness, her assumption that I couldn't resist her because I'm a red blooded male... it turns my stomach. Tonight Amy finally lit the touch paper by bringing me reports that rightfully should've been given to me hours ago.

This is why I usually only sleep with high class escorts. I dictate the terms, they accept them. It's all a transaction to them and I'm left with zero guilt or remorse.

"Do you think I got to be the CEO of Indica Tech from filing reports late?" I bite off.

She draws a breath, shaking her head. "No, sir."

I crumple up the report in my hands, disgusted. "No. I didn't get all this," I wave my hands to indicate our surroundings. "This penthouse in downtown Manhattan, the offices in Midtown, my fleet of cars and private planes, Indica Tech, and Indica Charities. None of it was earned through the kind of sloppy work that you have been showing recently."

Her throat works. Tears brim in her eyes, spilling over on one side. She gives her head a sharp shake. “I understand.”

I cock my head, staring at her. “Do you?” I look her up and down. “If you want to keep working here, you’ll do better. Turn things in on time. Dress appropriately for work. And under no circumstances should you ever just drop by your boss’s home with such a flimsy excuse.”

Her eyes widen. “Are you going to fire me?”

I roll my eyes, shaking my head. “No. I don’t fire people. I’m too important to have to deal with that.”

Right on cue, my brother Lucas appears in the doorway of the living room. Tall, broad, dark haired, and wearing a navy three piece suit, he could be my twin.

“Firing people is my job,” he says, smiling thinly. He beckons to her. “Come along, Miss Blankenship. We should talk.”

That’s when she starts crying. She turns to me as if I’m about to save her. I think that this is perhaps the first time she has ever been rejected so soundly; first sexually, and now she’s about to lose her job.

I make a shooing motion with my hand. “Get the fuck out.”

She leaves my living room in a hurry, running past Lucas. He heaves a sigh, pushes off the doorframe, and trails after her.

I pace to the window, staring out at the dazzling view of downtown New York City. The sun has just sunk below the horizon and now the lights on the surrounding buildings are starting to come on.

I take a deep breath, willing my body to stop shaking. When I get angry, which is about once an hour, the emotion washes through me like a blood red wave. When I get furious, like I am right now, it’s a struggle not to let the anger swallow me whole.

Anger has driven me far through life, all the way from our dingy childhood apartment to the most expensive penthouse in New York. It’s what pushed me to be the best when I was a dancer; it put a chip on my shoulder that was so big, it brought the dance world to kneel at my feet.

I glance at my platinum wristwatch, grinding my teeth. Seven o’clock. A little early to be drinking, yes. But today was exceptionally trying. Turning to my bar cart, I uncork the Scotch and pour myself a couple of fingers.

“Go ahead and make me one too.”

I glance back at my brother, my gaze narrowing. “That was fast.”

He shrugs a single shoulder. “She was ready to get out the door.”

I snort derisively. “I bet.”

My hands have stopped shaking as I pour the second drink. My brother, for all his faults, often provides the needed distraction at times like this.

I hand him the glass of scotch and walk to the other side of the room, sinking into my favorite chair. “I can’t believe that she just showed up here, expecting...” I trail off for a second. “I don’t actually know what she expected, honestly.”

Lucas loosens his tie as he sits down on a black velvet and teakwood chair. “She expected to become Mrs. Fordham, I think. She said that she thought you liked her.”

I wave a hand. “I’m done talking about her. Tell me what you found out today.”

His expression hardens. “You should really be in the meetings with Omni, Calum. The CEO Jack Schwartz asked where you were and when he would meet you.”

I push my cheek out with my tongue. “I’m trying to acquire his business and make him a rich bastard. He should be grateful, not asking questions.”

“Well, he’s still asking. Apparently he is quite religious and he’s very concerned about selling to a degenerate. He actually gave me a whole lecture about how most billionaires get their money from unscrupulous sources and spend it on ungodly things. He really seemed focused on that.”

“I fail to see how that has anything to do with me.”

“Well, he asked why you aren’t married. He said that he’s skeptical that you two share the same vision, being that you haven’t ever married.” He scrunches up one side of his face. “I got the distinct impression that he was trying to make sure that you aren’t gay.”

I let out a surprised half laugh. “So what if I was?”

My brother steeplest his fingers. “I think it would be a no-go.”

“That’s disgusting. If he didn’t invent this new type of block chain cryptocurrency, I would tell him to fuck off.” I lean forward, jabbing a finger into the dark wood of the coffee table. “I want that company, Lucas.”

He holds up a hand. “I would argue that you need his company to develop IndicaTech any further.”

I glare at him. “I don’t need *anyone* outside of this room, Lucas.”

He rolls his eyes. “Well, I have a bit of good news. It turns out that you and Jack have something in common.” His lips curve upward. “His young

daughter is heavily involved with ballet. He supports the New York Ballet, among other companies. From what I've found out, he is second only to you in terms of his patronage to their cause."

That gives me pause. I came from the world of ballet, back before I was a businessman. "That's... interesting," I allow.

"That's a way in," he says. "Use your mutual love of the ballet to your advantage."

I suck in a breath, thinking. "It would put me closer to Honor."

"I saw that the New York Ballet is going to do Sleeping Beauty in the spring. Maybe they need some sort of hands-on help."

I purse my lips. "Honor doesn't like that ballet, the last time I checked. She had her heart set on playing Giselle in the spring."

He rolls his eyes at me. "Honor this, Honor that. Look, the prima at the New York Ballet has never even looked your way, brother. Just because you are the primary source of financial support for the ballet doesn't mean Honor is going to sleep with you."

"I'm not expecting her to," I growl.

Lucas purses his lips and gives me a droll look. "It's obvious enough that you are expecting that, Calum. You should forget her. As I've said before, you should be focusing on someone else." He draws in a breath, shaking his head. "Anyone else. One of the long list of ladies that you are plowing your way through."

My expression tightens a fraction. "I'm only twenty nine, Lucas. How many other men do you know that have risen from nothing to cradle the world in the palm of their hand?"

He sips the scotch, rising to his feet. "That's not really the point, is it?"

"That's exactly the point." I scowl at him. "Where are you off to?"

He places his glass on the bar cart, cracking his knuckles. He hesitates for the slightest moment before folding his arms across his chest. "I'm on my way to drop some necessities off for Anita. Her nursing home called me and asked for a list of things."

At the sound of her name, my fist clenches around the glass tumbler. I struggle to keep my expression smooth and untroubled, but inside my guts roil.

"We have plenty of people to run those kinds of errands," I say evenly. "Send one of them."

Lucas rolls his eyes. "It's fine. I want to check in on her."

I narrow my eyes. "We don't owe her a damn thing, Lucas. Trust me," I grit out.

He turns toward the door, shaking his head. "After mom died, Anita took us in and raised us. She gave us warmth and security out of the goodness of her own heart. It doesn't seem like something that we should take for granted, no matter how far we've risen in the world since."

I know that he is ignorant of Anita's... needs. He's two years younger than me and I have done my best to keep him in the dark.

But damn if his words don't rankle me.

I glare at his back as he leaves. "Anita didn't do a fucking thing that didn't benefit her in some way. Just because you only see the ocean's surface does not mean that the sharks have all stopped circling."

He gives me half a wave as he leaves, leaving me alone with my bitter thoughts.

For a second, I think I can smell the heavy floral scent that Anita used to wear. Closing my eyes briefly, I see her reaching for me, a dangerous glint in her eyes. I clench every muscle in my body against her touch. In my mind's eye, she lets down her waterfall of dark, heavy hair. Her deep voice wafts over me. She pulls my hand up to rest on her breast, never dropping my gaze.

Don't you want to thank me, Calum?

I shake my head to clear that image, opening my eyes. My stomach lurches. I shoot to my feet, throwing back the last of my Scotch.

Suddenly, I feel the burning need to go to Club X.

KAIA

I frown down at my cell phone as another missed call goes to voicemail. I've now missed seven phone calls from my dad. Taking a deep breath, I turn the phone off completely and slip it into my locker.

My dad is probably leaving me another hate filled voicemail as we speak. If he knew where I am right now, knew what I was about to do to earn money, he would scream so loudly that I'm pretty sure he would have an aneurysm.

But I have to earn money. Enough money to pay my father back for every last cent he's ever spent on teaching me to become a perfect, graceful ballerina. I've calculated the cost and it is well over two hundred thousand dollars.

He's made it very clear that unless I come up with the money, I will follow his rules and do whatever he says until the day I die.

That knowledge slithers through my stomach as I close my locker and spin the combination.

"Lily, Brandie, Misty!" A dark-suited man sits by the door, reading off names. "One minute warning, girls."

Behind me, the dancers' changing room is loud and busy. Huge makeup mirrors and well-lighted white desks line one wall. White director's chairs are placed at intervals, each one of them currently supporting a stripper. They talk to each other as they lean close to the mirrors and perfect their lip gloss or apply another layer of blush.

I slide into the seat at the very end, feeling self conscious. I'm wearing what amounts to a tiny black bikini underneath a white kimono with clear

six inch stilettos. My hair is teased and blown out, my makeup looks almost garish under the room's soft lights.

For any other job, I would look insane. Sliding a glance down the row of dancers, I feel like I fit in just fine.

"Candi, Baby, Daisy," the man sitting next door the door reads off. "You're up next, ladies."

The dancer to my left gets up just as Mia struts in the room. She sees me and comes over, her caramel-colored body glistening with baby oil and glitter. She clutches the top to her red bikini in one hand, tossing it on the desk as she throws herself into the chair beside me.

"Fucking cheap assholes," she says, sounding perky even though she's complaining.

She produces a neat wad of cash from the red triangle of fabric between her legs, shaking her head. She starts counting the cash as she glances at me. "I got a bunch of frat boys. They've obviously never been to a spot this nice and they didn't behave themselves. And to top it all off? They hardly tipped anything, even when I took them back to the private rooms. It was basically a huge waste of my time."

I scrunch up my face. "I hope you told security to kick them out."

She chuckles. "You're damn right I did."

I glance at her outfit, noticing a snag in her fishnets. I perk up. "You can fix that," I say, pointing it out to her. "A little hairspray and some clear nail polish will do the trick."

Mia flashes me a puzzled glance. "Girl, I do not have time to be fixing a pair of tights. The men like to rip them, I throw them away and buy new ones. It's the circle of life."

A tall, dark skinned dancer in a black babydoll dress stands up. "Anybody got some baby wipes? I ran out."

Mia glances over at her, then looks back at me, rolling her eyes. She leans closer to me. "No way am I giving that bitch anything. We double teamed a bachelor party together last week and I think she stole from me."

My eyes widen. "Really?"

Mia nods, wrinkling her nose. "Yep. I have no time or energy for these hoes. I'm busy working it, trying to find a patron."

I pause. "A patron?"

She looks at me with a sigh. "Yes. A patron. Someone that will pay for my services. Someone with a fat wallet that will take me out of here."

I bite my lip. “Pay for you to strip privately, you mean?”

She huffs out a laugh. “No, honey. Any man can get that here for a few hundred dollars. A patron gets you any way he wants it, as often as he feels like it. In exchange, he pays for an apartment, a car service, all the fancy clothes you could want...” She looks at herself in the mirror, leaning close to examine her reflection. “I’ve heard that a few girls even married their patrons.”

My eyes widen. “Oh! That’s pretty huge. I wonder what those girls did to get noticed?”

She shrugs, eyeing a group of girls coming through the door. I turn and look at them, laughing and wearing street clothes.

“New girls,” Mia says, smacking her lips. “They all just turned eighteen, I bet. And they’re wearing designer labels. If I had to put money on it, I would guess that they live at home with their rich daddies, who don’t know that their little girls come here to get their ho on at night.”

I purse my lips. “I bet you said something similar about me not that long ago.”

“True. You have proven yourself, though. If your daddy has money, you wouldn’t know it from looking at you.” She pauses. “No offense. I’m just saying you don’t act entitled.”

I blow out a breath. “I am actually working here, trying to earn money to pay my dad back for private school. I’m never, ever going to owe anything to anyone ever again after working here for a year.”

She arches a brow. “Owing your dad sounds like some white nonsense. You should be saving every penny and looking for ways to get to the next level.”

“And what’s that?”

“I already told you, girl. A *patron*.” Her gaze catches on my white kimono. “I wouldn’t wear that out on stage. It’s too light colored. It’ll give you little fuzzy white balls in your armpits.”

I glance down at my kimono, biting my lower lip. “I’m not planning on wearing it out there. It’s just for comfort in here.” Smiling, I stand up and head back to my locker. I swap the white kimono out for a black version, figuring it’s better safe than sorry. “I am thinking of doing something a little different with my first routine, though.”

Mia leans forward, snagging her top and putting it on. “More fancy ballet shit?”

My face goes hot red. “Yeah. You think it’s a bad idea? I’m still on my month of probation with Club X...”

She looks at her teeth in the mirror, checking for lipstick. “I think you made a shit ton of money when you did that standing on your toes bit last week. Anybody would be crazy to tell you not to do it.”

She eases out of her chair, her long legs gleaming as she stalks over to the lockers. I follow her, shrugging out of my kimono. As I put the robe away in my lockers, I whisper to Mia. “Hey, remember how I told you that I’m a dancer during the day too?”

She’s changing into a different bikini, this one black pleather. “Uh... yeah, I guess I remember.”

I scrunch up my face. “No one at my day job knows about this place. And vice versa. It’s like... very much not allowed for ballerinas to...” I suck in a breath. “You know, dance for guys.”

She closes her locker, favoring me with a smile. “Your secret is very much safe with me, honey.”

“Cerise, Fawn, Latisha,” the bored employee announces. “One minute till showtime.”

Cerise. That’s me. I take a deep breath, looking toward the doorway.

“See you a little later,” I tell Mia. She smiles at me, counting her money again.

I totter toward the doorway, trying to make myself into Cerise. I start with my walk. Head held high, shoulders pulled back, arms nice and loose, lengthen my strides.

When I’m playing Cerise, I’m confident. Smiling. Teasing. Winking.

She likes men to look at her, to fawn over her tits and ass, to rain singles down as she slithers on the pole. She’s my opposite in so many ways. I’ve never dated anyone, much less had strange men touch me as boldly as my customers will tonight.

Cerise is confident and worldly, I am introverted and naive. It’s just easier to be Cerise for a while, a mask that I can slip off and leave in my locker at the end of the night.

Heading down the dark little hallway to the stage, I mount the steps and wait for the emcee to announce me. My heart rate rises. My smile stays plastered in place. In the seconds before I go onstage, it feels the same as it does when I’m waiting in the wings in my tutu and pointe shoes.

“Now appearing on the main stage, it’s Cerise!”

My heart beat sounds like a drum in my ears. My music comes on, MIA's "Bad Girls". At the sound of the first notes, a switch is flipped for me.

There is a spotlight illuminating a shiny stripper pole on Club main stage. Everything around it is dim, made more so by my singleminded focus. I strut out onto the darkened stage, barely seeing the audience. All I can see is the stage, bare, waiting for me.

A shiver of excitement slides up my spine. I reach out for the pole, caressing it with one hand as I turn to face the audience. I don't really see them, though. Just the bright stage lights down front.

I grin and skim my fingers down my hip, biting my lip. Turning toward the pole, I slip my shoes off. As soon as I grip the pole and push onto my toes, a few whistles leave the crowd. I go into point briefly and the face away from the audience, leaning against the plot as I slide down into splits. I raise my arms over my head and then swing my hip around, grinding the ground beneath me. I keep a look of pleasure on my face as I get up, quickly turning it into climbing the pole and artfully sliding down. I step away from the pole and arch my back.

Taking a deep breath, I move away and focus on the audience members. A cluster of men in the front row grab my attention by waving a hundred dollar bill. I slide over to them, a knowing smirk on my face, and get on my knees. Plucking the bill from the customer, I push my breasts together and squeeze them. At the same time I spread my knees farther apart and run my hand down to the band of my bikini. Feeling naughty, I make sure to cup my pussy and pluck at my nipple, all the while making eye contact with the stage man.

Then I get on my stomach, never breaking eye contact, and slowly roll my ass so that I hump the floor in slow motion.

I don't see his reaction. I have no idea if it's good or not. I'm just sucked into the performative nature of that slow body roll.

When I finally get up, I spread my legs wide and skim my bottoms down my legs. Bending over, I make sure that the customer gets the first look at my pussy.

Then I stride back to the pole. I lean my ass on the pole facing the audience, sliding down, an orgasmic expression on my face. Dollar bills rain down from above as I complete my splits, reaching above me to help myself back up. This time I go on my tiptoes with one foot, lifting the other

high above my head. I lower my leg to the floor and raise my torso, steady myself as my arms come up in an arch above my head.

I tear off my top, my breasts bouncing free. I climb the pole again and wrap my legs around it, dropping the piece of fabric and letting my entire body fall backward oh so slowly.

I let myself slide down until my hands can touch the floor. Then I gracefully round into a back bend and rise once more. Composing myself for a moment, I lift onto my tiptoes and execute a half-pirouette. Planting my right foot, I sweep my left leg skyward, then fold my body into the splits again.

All of this takes just a heart beat... or so it seems. Before I know it, the song shifts. The applause makes me turn pink.

I blink a few times and then run down to the end of the stage, collecting the cascade of dollar bills that I earned. After I sweep up most of them and grab my bikini, I hurry off stage. A minute later, I have my bikini on again and the money stashed in a little locked drop box beside the stage.

I didn't really have time to count, but the dollar bills felt weighty against my palm. One more step closer to independence.

I strut out to see at least five tables signaling to me that they want a private dance.

That's the least favorite part of my night. But at least guys are interested in what I can provide... I credit Mia with giving me tip to improve my onstage presence.

Lifting my chin, I'm about to walk toward the closest table when one of the dark-suited managers raises his hand to me.

I shoot him an odd look, but he continues waving me over. I look at the table of customers, hold up a single finger, and then scoot over to the bar.

He sniffs, rubbing his nose. "You got a guy waiting for you in the platinum room, darlin. The customer isn't a regular but he's very rich and very private. This customer is to be treated with kid gloves, you got it? Whatever he wants, you give." He looks me up and down. "Whatever's legal, anyway."

I am absolutely sure that he means all but the last part. My heart rate picks up. I nod my head, glancing at the tables.

"Hey," the manager says, snapping his fingers in front of my face. "Don't worry about them. Worry about the guy in the platinum room. You

could easily make three or four times as much tonight as you would've normally. Now get going."

Eyes widening, I nod and scurry toward the Club's staircase. I bite my lip, trying not to look worried. Usually I'm not called in when customers choose dancers for the luxurious private rooms. Then again, it's only been a few days since Mia gave me a critique to earn more on stage.

Maybe it has started to work. Maybe it is really my time to shine.

As I climb the stairs, I try to convince myself that I deserve to be called back to the most expensive private room of all.

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CALUM

I recline on the red velvet booth of Club X's platinum room, sipping a tumbler of expensive whiskey. My eyes are focused on the gleaming silver pole in the center of the room. Beneath it, low lights seep from the bottom of an elevated stage. The walls and floors all echo the same shade of dusty, iridescent red.

A low melody is pumped through unseen speakers, the sound brash against my ears. As I look up at the door, I see the top of the blonde's head through the open doorway as she climbs the last few stairs.

Anticipation slides down my spine. I take her in as she mounts the steps. Long blonde hair, blown out to fall over her slim shoulders in a gleaming mass. Tawny hazel eyes, high cheekbones, a pert nose, and a small slick of hot pink on her mouth. Her lips alone are an invitation, parting as she lays eyes on me.

My gaze slips down to the rest of her body. She wears a sheer white kimono, an iridescent black bikini underneath that, and tall silver heels. Her tits are pushed up, looking small but tempting. As she stops at the door to toe off her heels, she turns and gives me a glimpse of her long legs and fantastic ass.

She's a dead ringer for Honor. At another time, in another setting, she could be the delicate prima ballerina. The same one that broke my heart back when I was young and foolish enough to still believe in that fairytale.

She enters the platinum room quietly, tilting her head as she takes me in. "I'm Cerise." She swings her hips as she struts toward me, her eyes wide and innocent.

Like she doesn't work in this fucking club and make her money by grinding on strange men. Like she isn't working me right now, trying to figure out my weaknesses.

Her feigned innocence does something to me. It makes my cock hard, yes. But it also makes me think dark thoughts.

Violent thoughts.

My mouth tightens just a little. "You can call me Mr. X."

Her eyebrows lift just a fraction as she comes close to me, putting a hand on the velvet booth. She leans down, giving me a peek of her creamy cleavage. "You want me to dance for you, X?"

My cock stirs. Her tits are small and firm, pressed up by her bikini top. I drag my eyes up to her face, my voice erupting in a guttural rumble.

"Mr. X," I correct her sharply. "And yes. I want you on the pole."

She flashes me a smile. She turns, hips swaying, and heads back toward the door. "How long do you want me, baby?"

She presses a discreet button and her music comes on, sultry and low. She turns toward me, an eyebrow lifting. "Is this loud enough?"

I couldn't care less about the music, honestly. Chances are that if it was made in the last hundred years, I won't like it anyway.

I flap my hand, uninterested. "I'll buy all of your time tonight, Cerise. Just hurry the fuck up. I want to see you dance like you did downstairs. That's why I chose you."

Her cheeks stain hot pink. She glances at the floor for a moment. "You saw me dance on stage?"

As she asks, she starts moving toward the pole. Hopping onstage, she starts to approach it. I sit back, feeling my pulse pick up.

"That's right," I say. I try to play it cool as though she's not about to take her clothes off and try to make me horny. Sucking in a deep breath, I tell myself to relax.

She hops up onto the platform and starts gyrating her hips, running her hands up through her hair and down the front of her body. Her eyes close and then pop open for a moment, pinning me in place as she rubs the silky material covering her pussy.

Something about her expression, a heavy lidded innocence, really fucking turns me on. She's like a virgin giving off fuck me eyes for the very first time.

I know it's all a show. I know that it can't be real. But I let myself sink into the moment, let myself be swept along by the tide.

Cerise grabs the pole and swings around it, undulating her body. I tilt my head to the side and bite my lower lip. She climbs the pole deftly, leaning out and then letting her back bow until she touches the floor with her hands. She does the splits in midair, her kimono falling so that I can see her legs and her material covered pussy.

"Take off your robe," I order.

A little smirk appears on her face. She dismounts the pole by doing a roundoff, then gives me a sultry look. She unties her kimono slowly and then shrugs out of it, leaving her in the black bikini.

I take a sip of my whiskey, trying not to show how base my thoughts are. I'm excited by the slight curves of her hips as she dances before me. She bows before coming back up very slowly, never breaking eye contact with me.

Then she grabs onto the stripper pole with one hand and lifts onto her tiptoes. Her arm arches gracefully above her head. She leans forward, extending her leg behind me. I trace the curve as it lifts behind her.

When I saw her do this move before, I thought that perhaps she had some ballet training. But now I think it's more than that.

My lovely little ballerina is truly talented and well trained. The fact that Cerise is working here at Club X is a puzzle. She's been involved in a hardcore ballet program somewhere, I can tell. Unless she has recently quit, she is doing something very forbidden in the ballet world.

I sit back and watch her climb the pole again, hiding a smirk. Moonlighting here is a definite no no, whether her program explicitly says so or not.

The song shifts just as she pulls on the strings of her top.

"Cerise," I command. "Come here."

I pat my thigh. She blushes, climbing to her feet. Her hips sway as she pads over to me. Her cheeks color again when she stands over me, leaning forward to push my shoulders back against the red velvet booth.

As she looks me right in the eye, I wonder how she manages to blush on cue. I know it's doubtless a manipulation of some sort. But I have to say, it's working on me. I can feel myself falling under her spell.

Especially when she straddles my lap and sinks down so that I feel the exquisite pleasure of her ass against my thighs. My instinct is to grab her, to

take control.

I am always in control.

But I just ball my hands into fists and tense my whole body.

“You should be mine,” I tell her, looking at her perfect little tits.

She puts her hands up against the booth behind my head. “I am yours, Mr. X. You can ask me for anything tonight.”

I scowl. “What if I want you at my beck and call? Hmm?”

I raise a hand and push her hair off her neck. It’s so fucking silky and soft against my fingers.

Cerise shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

She rolls her body, grinding against my cock. My eyes narrow on her face.

“I could be your patron. That’s what all the girls here want, isn’t it?”

Her brow wrinkles. “Too much talking. Not enough dancing. Don’t you agree?”

I clench my jaw. I think she just found a polite way to tell me to shut up. Then again, she’s pretty much dry humping me. I try to relax, try to focus on the softness of her skin, the gentle hint of rose that wafts off her neck, the warmth of her pressed against me.

It’s almost like intimacy and just as addictive.

She looks me in the eye; I can see from this close that her eyes are tawny brown with green flecks. She presses her hands against my chest, biting her lip, and leans close to my ear.

I’m not sure what I’m expecting, but she just lets out the breathiest sound, the tiniest of moans. She grinds her body against mine as she grabs my hands and brings them to her waist.

“Fuck,” I grit out. I’m surprised at how this girl has managed to turn me out. I lift a hand and plunge it into her hair, wishing more than anything I could pull her in for a kiss.

Of course, I can think of other ways that she could please me... My eyes are glued on her mouth, imagining her on her knees, opening those lips, sucking my fucking cock.

My cock is currently pressed between our bodies; each time she grinds on it or rolls her body, I come a little bit closer to doing something very, very wicked to my little ballerina.

“Tell me something,” I whisper. “Do you know how much this turns me on?”

She blushes and grins. She undulates her body, rolling it against me, and cocks a brow. “Why don’t you tell me?”

Instinctively, my grip tightens in her hair. She’s so dainty as she rides my lap, so angelic and yet so fucking dirty. She gasps in surprise as I start to move against her, thrusting my cock up between our bodies.

She stills for the barest moment; I seem to have crossed one of her boundaries though she doesn’t say so.

I take my hand out of her hair and return it to her waist, knowing that I could easily snap and take things too far.

I’ve done it before.

Hell, I’ve even done it at this club, in this booth. I’ve definitely gone all the way from kissing to fondling to being blown by a stripper.

There is something holding me back from Cerise, though. I don’t know if it’s the fact that she’s obviously had ballet training or the faux innocence that she projects. Maybe it’s her smell, a vague splash of rose but nothing too fake or flashy.

But I look into her eyes and something echoes between us. A longing, perhaps.

I wish I was the kind of man that she thinks I am. She probably just sees wealth and good looks when she looks at me.

But beneath that scarily thin veneer lies something so twisted and so dark that there is no chance at redemption. Not for me.

Cerise drags me from my thoughts by pushing up off my lap and sinking to her knees. She rubs her hands up and down my thighs, biting her plump lower lip and making eye contact with me. She lowers her head and kisses my thigh.

My eyes close for a second. Shivers of anticipation run through my veins. She’s barely even touching my leg. I haven’t felt this kind of crackling excitement since I was a teenager.

God, if Honor ever touched me like this, ever sat on my lap and ground against my cock, I—

I don’t even know that I’m going to come before it’s already happening. By the time I realize that my balls are tingling, it’s already too late. I’m literally so surprised that I don’t even warn her that I’m about to come. I don’t say anything; my brain and my mouth are both too out of it to do more than whisper, “oh fuck.”

The orgasm bursts over me and spurts out the tip of my cock, which twitches like it is fucking possessed. It's like a dam of pleasure has suddenly broken open. From the top of my head all the way down to my toes, I feel my endorphins pumping into my bloodstream, causing a moment of pure euphoria.

Cerise swipes her hand too close to my dick and gets a wet, sticky palm print. She looks at her hand, then looks up at me. Her eyes widen with genuine shock.

“Oh, Mr. X—” she starts, blushing furiously.

As if she's never seen it before. As if she didn't work for it, teasing me. As if she didn't cause it to happen.

I shut down.

“Move,” I bark at her.

She scrambles back, standing up. My mouth twists into a grimace as I pull a card from my pocket. It's all black with a shiny stripper pole outlined in red. I force the card into her hands.

“Here. It's five thousand dollars.”

I turn toward the door, ready to leave. My heart still beats like a drum in my ears.

“Wait, this is... for me?” she says, sounding a little taken aback.

I pause, looking back at her. “It's less than I make a minute. Take it.”

Then I stride out of the room, leaving her standing there, mouth agape. I hurry out the club, pulling up my phone to text my limo driver. My hands are shaking a little as I step out onto the darkened street.

Damn. Despite my best efforts, I still went way too far. I turn and look up at the club, a nondescript building on a street full of warehouses. I see a window open a few floors up; faintly, I think I can make out a pair of wide hazel eyes staring back at me.

Cerise.

As the limo pulls up, I get in the back seat, not bothering to wait for the door to be opened. I feel vaguely dirty. But as I give the order to head home, I already know the truth.

I'll be back to visit her.

KAIA

“Shit, shit, shit,” I curse under my breath. I rush up the broad steps that lead to the three story gray stone building. My eye catches on the sharp angles of the big picture windows against the overcast morning sky. The New York Ballet building is a monolith, taking up half a New York City block.

My left shoe is wearing dangerously thin. Even the newspapers I’ve shoved in the sole won’t save this pair for much longer. As I rush up the stone steps of New York ballet, I make a mental note to spend a little of my hard earned money on a new cheap pair of flats.

I can see my ballet class gathering upstairs through the wide windows. I’m definitely going to be late. Tucking my head down, I push through the massive plate glass door, trying to calm my nerves.

Every ounce of my energy should be focused on this visit to the hallowed halls that I’ve dreamt of for so long. But a part of me is distracted.

Remembering with a shiver Mr. X’s gaze from the night before. Tall, dark, and handsome, he was the customer that every girl dreams about. He was so freaking hot, so demanding, and so *on edge*.

As I hurry up the stylized concrete stairs to follow my class, I bite my lip. There was a moment when Mr. X suddenly went stiff last night. Only a few seconds later did I realize that he’d... finished... It honestly surprised the hell out of me.

After that, he shoved a card carrying five thousand dollars at me and left abruptly. It all happened so fast that I just felt... confused, mostly.

It also made me wonder about Mr. X’s life. Who was he? Aside from his money, I wanted to know more about him.

I can still feel his deep blue gaze on my body as I rush along.

I come up to the top of the stairs, seeing my class on the other end of the airy hallway, moving into the doors of the largest theater. I run to catch up with them, trying to look dignified in my gray sweater dress and heels.

I miss the door closing by half a minute. When I push through the dark doors and enter the back of the theater, my dance teacher and several stoic looking New York Ballet representatives take note.

I swallow and blush furiously, rushing to file into the rows of seats with the rest of my class.

“Hurry up,” a silver haired man snaps at all of us. He is dressed in a light blue button up and dark slacks, but he has rolled up his sleeves and unbuttoned his top button. He’s classically handsome and very in shape. I would put money on his having been a dancer at some point.

As I sink into the velvet seat, I notice that Eric moves to sit next to me. I blush and give him a little nod, but there is no time to whisper.

“I’m Basil Smith,” the silver haired man announces, leaning against the wall of the stage. The stage behind him is dark, the curtains pulled tightly.

I try not to think of just how badly I want to be a featured soloist, dancing on point on this exact stage. I want it so badly that I can actually hear the applause of a ghost audience echo throughout the great hall; badly enough that sweat begins to break out on the back of my neck at the thought of looming interviews for the company.

“I am the main choreographer here at the New York Ballet. I’m joined today by Chase Gorley and Emma Rosenburg, who are on the NYB board.”

He waves his hand to indicate the two people beside him. Emma is probably in her fifties and petite, with a dramatic sweep of shiny dark hair and an immaculate navy sheath dress. Chase reminds me of a lot of Club X customers; he is older than Emma by at least a decade, well dressed in a dark three piece suit, and carries a great deal more weight on his frame than anyone else in the room. He cocks his head, seeming unbothered by this, and studies all of us instead.

“We have brought you all here today as the first part of our interview process,” Emma says. Her voice is high and reedy, her expression stern. “At the NYB, we want to evaluate each dancer on his or her strengths and see what they might add to our company. But just as important to the hiring process is making sure that all applicants get to know us and understand the unique and challenging environment of the company before continuing with the interviews.”

Basil smirks a little at her words. “Yes. Thank you, Emma. We will be giving you a run down of the history of the New York Ballet as a company, followed by a dance class focusing on the rigors of the NYB.”

Chase cuts in, his voice low and rough. “Only then do we start the interviews. And I have to say, we are selecting maybe five new dancers out of more than a thousand new applicants.”

“Joining this company is very competitive,” Basil agrees. “Only the creme de la creme need apply.”

Emma glances at her slender wristwatch. “Can we move things alone, Basil?”

Basil gives her a look so cold, I swear I feel its icy chill all the way here in the back row of students. I glance over at Eric, arching a brow silently.

His lips twist into a tiny smirk. He rolls his eyes.

“Yes, thank you, Emma,” Basil says, his tone dry. “The New York Ballet was formed in 1947, with a rather spectacular roster of dancers—“

A muffled scream comes from somewhere far behind the curtain that hangs heavy across the stage. It’s a woman’s voice, tinged with a French accent, growing closer as it rises in pitch.

“You bastard!” she bleats. “You absolute... fucking... bastard!”

Basil slowly turns toward the sound, his expression completely unsurprised. “Honor, darling! I’m holding a class here and we can all hear you.”

That name gives me pause. Where have I heard that before?

But before I can focus on that, it’s swept away by muffled footsteps approaching the curtain.

“Let go of me!” Honor shouts. “I’m going to tell everybody about our little affair, Mikhail!”

The curtain moves like there is a scuffle going on just beyond it. Both of my eyebrows raise; the argument that Honor and Mikhail are clearly having couldn’t be choreographed better if they tried.

Honor rips the black velvet curtain and stalks out on stage, shaking Mikhail off. She is lithe and blonde, dressed in a white leotard and a filmy white ballet skirt. She’s followed by a desperate-looking Mikhail, his black t-shirt and jeans setting off his silvery dark hair. He glances at his audience, his lips twisting in a grimace.

“Let them all know!” Honor declares, sweeping her hand to indicate her audience. “Tell everyone what you just suggested when I told you that I was

pregnant with your child.”

Mikhail glances at us, shaking his head. When he finally speaks, his deep timbre is heavily inflected with Russian or Ukrainian.

“Don’t,” he warns her. “Don’t make this public.”

I can see Honor practically vibrating with rage. “No? You don’t want me to tell everybody out here? What, are you afraid that word will get back to your wife?”

My eyes widen. I glance at Eric and see him mouthing, “oh shit!” to me. I nod. This is some really juicy drama, playing out right before our eyes.

“You won’t get me to change my mind by telling a bunch of ballet students. Just have a scrape and be done with it!” he roars.

My hand flies to my throat. My jaw drops. I could be wrong, but I think Mikhail just told his lover to get an abortion. There have long been whispers about what happens when a prima gets pregnant.

I mean, you basically have to decide if you want your career to end or you want to continue dancing.

A hush falls over the whole room when Mikhail shouts that. He clenches his teeth, looks at the audience, and growls at us. “Grow up, will you?”

Basil straightens his spine, looking back and forth between the tearful ballerina and the fuming Russian. He raises his eyebrows.

“Relationships between dancers and stage managers are explicitly forbidden. Mikhail, you are her teacher, for god’s sake. And Honor, you should know better. You’re a student, no matter how much you advance in the company. If I am reading this situation correctly...” He gestures to both of them pulling his fist in tight. “We have a big problem.”

Honor lifts her chin defiantly. “I would say that we are beyond having a problem, Basil.”

Basil shoots her a glare and then turns back to his audience. “I think we will have to reschedule this for another day.” He glances at Emma and Chase, who look livid. “Will you please lead your class out of the theater? Mikhail and Honor, let’s go to somewhere more private.”

Honor shakes her head and storms off the stage. Mikhail casts a jaundiced eye over us as we are standing up, muttering to himself as he follows Honor.

As soon as we get to the theater doors, the whispers of my classmates burst to life. I hear, “Can you believe that she just outed them both like

that?”

Then literally everyone is talking at once. I feel a tug at my elbow and find Ella there, giving me a wide eyed glance. She pats her elegantly pinned up hair as she wonders aloud.

“Could you imagine having the balls to sleep with the prima ballerina and then telling her to get an abortion?”

I shake my head vehemently. “No, I definitely can’t.”

Eric catches up with us, easily taking up my other elbow. “Holy shit. That was insane. I thought that they were both playacting at first.”

As we are herded down the echoing hallway, Ella wrinkles her nose. “I’ve heard that one in three ballerinas undergoes an abortion before they retire.”

I roll my eyes. “That can’t be a real statistic. I don’t know about you, but I was put on an IUD when I turned sixteen.”

Ella purses her lips at me. “Aren’t you a virgin?”

My cheeks flame red. I bow my head, my eyes widening. “I am not!”

A lie, yes. I’m ashamed to say that I’ve listened to my father’s explicit threats about what will happen if I ever sleep with anyone before I’m married.

I’ll kill him, Kaia. If any man talks you into being his slut, I’ll string him up and watch him suffer.

I duck my head. If my friends had the slightest clue about my home life, they would probably stop talking to me. I finally moved out of his house six months ago, but not without his scorn.

You want to be independent? Fine. I’ve tallied up the expenses of raising you and putting you through ballet academy. Do you know how much you cost this family? Three hundred and twenty five thousand dollars, Kaia.

I swallow. Three hundred and twenty five thousand dollars is a lot of money... and now that I’ve moved out of his house, that’s what I still owe my dad.

It’s the only thing I’m focused on at this moment, other than dancing.

I hastily sneak a peek at Eric, who looks completely unruffled by Ella’s revelation that I’m a virgin. He changes the subject, easing the panicked feeling in my chest.

“What do you think happens to Mikhail and Honor? Do they get fired? Or just get scolded?”

“Definitely fired. Ballet companies function with a level of trust. How can anyone at NYB ever trust either of them again?”

Biting my lip, I clear my throat. “That could be good for us, actually. I mean, that means more spots open up in the corps, right?”

Manon is just ahead of me. She turns her dark head at that, laughing cruelly. “Yeah, right. Let’s be real here. Your chances of getting picked to be in this company are basically zero. You should focus on finding a job teaching ballet at some kind of school for crippled children or something.”

My heart thumps in my chest.

Ella jumps right in before I can even really react. “You’re just pissed because your pill popping mom is in rehab again. Get a fucking life, Manon.”

Manon glares at Ella. “Back at you, Affirmative Action Annie.”

“Die in a fire, Barbie bitch,” Ella fires back.

“Watch where you—“ Eric says.

But before he can even get the thought out, Manon stumbles as she reaches the stairs. For a split second, it looks like she’s going to take a header straight down.

But at the last moment, Manon’s friend Roxie reaches out and steadies her. Manon sends us back a superior look, tossing her head and click clacking down the marble stairs.

Ella’s mouth curves into a smirk. “Entitled little priss. Anyway, let’s talk about Mikhail’s wife. Do either of you know who she is?”

I shake my head, absorbed in the drama. As we walk out of the New York Ballet, I’m just really happy that I have friends that will stand up for me.

CALUM

Checking my watch, I consider leaving Emma's office at the New York Ballet. I'm not accustomed to waiting for anybody, especially not for nearly fifteen minutes. I'm a firm believer that you teach people how to treat you.

Heaving myself up off the sleek leather couch, I glance around the well-appointed office. My movement alarms the little redhead secretary, whose cheeks flame bright red as I approach her in the doorway.

She squeaks out. "Mr. Fordham, I'm sure if you wait for another minute or two—"

I brush right past her, in no mood for her attempts to stall me. "Move."

She stares after me for a moment, then hurries to catch up with me. "I just know that Mrs. Rosenburg is tied up with—"

A door down the hall is flung open with full force, several people spilling out of it all at once. I see Emma first, looking chic as ever in her dark blue dress. Beside her are her fellow board members, Chase and Mark.

In front of all of them is Honor, bursting out of the room like a bullet leaving a gun. She holds her dark head high but she's clearly sobbing, all but running down the hallway.

Seeing her gives me pause. It slows my steps.

What on earth is the prima ballerina doing running away in such hysterics?

Mark scurries after her, calling her name. "Honor—"

Chase notices me standing only twenty feet to his right. He snakes out a hand and catches Emma, jerking his head toward me. She looks at me, clearing her throat in a way that suggests she is embarrassed.

It's hard to tell with Emma though, as usual. Some combination of years of ballet training and Botox has wiped all expression from her face.

She flattens her hands against her fitted skirt and tucks a strand of hair back behind her ear. "Calum. I'm sorry, I was obviously..." She looks down the hall after Honor, taking a deep breath. "We asked you to come in for a reason, as you can see."

I don't know what reaction she's looking for, so I play my cards close to my chest. I shrug, endeavoring to keep my expression neutral. "I'm going to need some kind of explanation."

She and Chase walk down the hall toward me. I give them a look, folding my arms across my chest. Emma flashes me what passes for a smile and ushers me back to her office.

"Please," she says. "Discretion is very important at this stage."

Turning around and shaking my head, I allow myself to be herded back into her office. She slinks behind the sleek metal desk; Chase plops down his considerable weight in a chair opposite. I remain standing, staring at them both. "What's going on?"

Chase purses his lips, glancing at Emma. "We found out that Honor and Mikhail are having an affair." He gives me a flat look. "Not even really trying to keep it secret, either."

My eyebrows rise. My mouth contorts. "Wait, she's fucking him? Willingly?" I scoff disbelievingly. "He's so old!"

Emma and Chase exchange a look. Emma leans her elbows on her desk, giving a dour look. "Yes. Not only are they having an affair, but Honor says that she's pregnant with his child. The whole situation is horribly messy."

Chase grunts. "She told an entire class of ballet students all the sordid details too. Honor really made sure that there was no way to walk the information back."

Emma sighs, giving her head a tiny shake.

"What's going to happen to her?" I ask, frowning. Inside, I'm a mass of venomous snakes and white hot anger. But I keep a tight leash on it for now; this isn't the time or the place to vent my fury.

Emma frowns. Or at least I think she tries to. With all her facial fillers, I feel like I can't really tell.

"She and Mikhail are both fired. That's what has to happen here. I see no other choice."

I wonder to myself if this is the break that I needed to get Honor to take me as a lover. I've lusted after her for years, having known her for well over a decade.

"We thought that since you and Honor danced together at ballet academy, you might like to weigh in on how we should go about replacing Honor," Chase says.

I cock a brow. "Don't you have two or three ballerinas ready and more than willing to step into her place?"

Emma lays her hands flat on the desk. "There is no obvious replacement. We assumed we had two more years to find someone with that *je ne sais pas*."

Chase looks at his wristwatch. "You'd better tell him the other problem too, Emma."

I huff a laugh. "Other than not having a star to lead your spring productions?"

Emma's mouth twists. "We are also down a stage manager."

My eyes narrow. "I'm sure that someone could be lured away if the money is right. I've been pushing for someone to replace Mikhail for a year now." I pause, tilting my head. "What about Stein? He seemed less than enthused about the Royal Ballet when I talked to him last year."

"He was already scooped up by the Paris Ballet," Chase sighs.

I lean forward. "You have tried whoever Stein replaced at the Paris Ballet, then? Who is it, Berger?"

"We were hoping that we would pull in someone closer to hand, actually." Emma gives a rueful little smile. "I know that it's been five years since you last worked as a stage manager—"

My eyebrows shoot up. "You're kidding. Are you joking?" I give a startled chuckle. "You just finished telling me that you don't have any stars and you are essentially rudderless without Mikhail. Which, by the way, I specifically warned you both about."

I fold my hands against my stomach and sit back, angry that they would even bother to ask me.

"Look, Calum—" Chase begins.

I shake my head. "After I hurt myself dancing, I moved on with my life. I started Indica Tech. I started Indica Charity. The last three years alone, I've been insanely productive."

"We would donate your salary to your charity, obviously," Emma says.

“And a portion of the ticket sales as well,” Chase says. He shoots Emma a glare.

I level them both with a glare. “You would be doing my charity a disservice, because my salary here would be just a fraction of what I normally earn.”

Emma holds up a hand. “When you were a dancer here, didn’t you have to pull out of a show at the end?”

I squint at her. “I was hurt doing a production of Sleeping Beauty, if that’s what you mean.”

She bobs her head. “And you never got to stage manage a production of Sleeping Beauty, as far as I am aware.”

“No.” I lean forward again, engaged. “Is that what you are offering as bait? The lure of doing something new?”

Chase smirks. “Yes. We would need you for Sleeping Beauty and Giselle, two of the hardest ballets to dance or direct. And not that it matters, but there would also be some other smaller showcases, I imagine.”

I sit back, pushing my cheek out with my tongue. None of what they are saying moves me in the least. But a lightbulb does go off in the back of my head. “If I took the position, you would have to inform the other patrons of the transition, wouldn’t you?”

Emma and Chase share a glance. Emma clears her throat. “I suppose.”

I smile a little. “I’m interested in doing business with one of your donors. Jack Schwartz.”

Chase raises his eyebrows. “We could... maybe notify all the patrons? I mean, it wouldn’t be very hard to put together some sort of elegant engraved card or something.”

“It would have to highlight how much I’ve given over the last few years and how grateful the company is for my continued good works.”

“Of course,” Emma says. “We’ll state that we are very grateful to you.”

I purse my lips. “I think that someone in my office will gladly put together a thoughtful reflection on my career and more importantly, on my charitable nature.”

There is silence just then as Emma and Chase look at each other. It goes on for a little too long.

I drum my fingers on the table, trying not to be offended. “I need you two to agree that I’m known for my good works above all else.”

“Of course,” Emma says, eager to please me.

I stare her down until she flushes a little.

“Well?” Chase prompts. “Will you do it?”

My mouth flattens. I raise a finger. “I’ll think about it,” I allow. “And I do mean think. I have a lot to consider.”

Emma looks vaguely pleased. “We would so appreciate it, Calum.”

“We’ll see,” I say, leaning back and shrugging a shoulder. “But regardless of whether or not I take the job, I need something from you.”

Chase rubs his hands together, smiling. “What’s that?”

“Let go of all your dancers that are not ready to move up and take the spotlight.” I stand, casting a serious gaze at them both. “Anybody that isn’t hungry for it? Demote them to the corps or fire them. Clear the way for thirty or forty brand new dancers to step forward.”

“Oh, Calum.” Emma says. “I don’t know...”

“It’s not a request. I’ll make the money you receive from my charity contingent upon that condition.”

I suck in a breath, looking at my watch. When I look back up, they both have sour expressions on their faces. “If that’s all, I have a thousand things to do.”

Emma stands up, graceful as ever. “I’ll walk you out, Calum.”

“No need. You two should be figuring out how to tell those dancers that they are fired.”

With that pronouncement, I head out of the office, closing the button on my jacket as I go.

My emotions swirl in the air around me, concussing me. But I can see one thing very clearly.

Me taking a bow as the audience raves, the applause so thunderous that I can’t hear a single voice in the back of my head.

My lips curve as I head out the front door of the building.

KAIA

I stand in my attic apartment in Jamaica, Queens, trying to find the will to leave. My black kitty Exupéry meows and rubs against my leg. He is completely blind but usually seems to be in good spirits. No one else would take him in at the animal shelter so I did.

Kaia, keeper of broken things.

My face would go great on one of those Catholic saint candles that I so love to collect. I turn my head and look at my collection of candles, each looking stoic on its cylindrical glass form.

What can I say, they are cheap at the bodega on the corner. Plus, when I light them, it gives my apartment instant ambiance.

I scratch Exupéry behind his ears and sigh. Taking a deep breath, I stop double checking the contents of my backpack. Exupéry butts me with his head.

“I see you,” I tell Exupéry. Kneeling, I scratch him under his chin.

Purrs burst from Exupéry’s chest. My lips curve upward in a smile. He always seems enthused about everything I do, especially if it directly involves me petting him. He’s been like that ever since he strolled up the attic stairs when I left the door open last summer. He doesn’t mind how tiny my studio is in the least or how secondhand chic my attempts to decorate it are.

He doesn’t even seem to notice the fact that he’s blind, other than the occasional fall down the stairs.

I make eye contact with him as I gently scratch behind his ears. “I wish you could come to Hartford with me. My family would hate you, but at

least I'd have a buddy." I scrunch my face up. "You'd be a welcome distraction, honestly."

Exupéry's tail twitches; he loves being talked to and petted at the same time. I pet him for another twenty seconds and then I sigh.

"Okay. Wish me luck."

Grabbing my backpack, I shoulder the straps as I start down the stairs. It's only a few blocks to the bus I need to catch that will take me out of New York City and all the way to Hartford. It's cold and overcast as I climb on the bus and find a window seat.

I text my father to let him know I'm on my way. Then I stare out the window, trying not to bite my nails as the bus pulls out.

The question of why my father summoned me home is heavy on my mind. Did I just wait too long between visits? Or is there a more sinister reason?

The scenery changes, though I'm barely aware of it. The gritty concrete texture of New York soon gives way to the strangely empty echo of the highway that winds itself near the suburbs. At one point, there are no exits for miles, just dead grass and barren trees.

Then we're in Connecticut; only an hour and half from New York City, Hartford likes to play the charming country cousin to its older, more glamorous sister city.

Outside, the suburbs of Hartford are entirely different than that of New York. The streets here are clean as a pin, the yards expansive and green, the houses are huge three story affairs made of brick. It's kind of amazing how much each house looks to the next.

I suck in a deep breath and get off at my stop, my heart hammering the entire three blocks to my parent's house.

I trot the last forty feet up the yard, ringing the doorbell on the off-white brick house. Out of the corner of my eye, I see ivy starting to climb a corner of the house.

My father hates ivy. One corner of my mouth lifts in the ghost of a smile as I wait for someone to open the broad oak door.

But as soon as it opens, my smile vanishes. My sister stands there in her dark blue Catholic schoolgirl outfit, her blonde hair pulled halfway up with a long dark blue ribbon. Her lips twist with humor as she eyes me, wearing jeans and a black sweater.

"God, you look wretched," she says. "As always."

I repress a sigh. "Hello, Hazel."

She rolls her eyes and leaves the door open, heading down the long hallway into the kitchen. Pressing my lips into a thin line, I step in and close the door behind myself. Although I've just come from the blustery day outside, it feels colder inside. As I head in my sister's wake, I guess that Dad has been on a money saving kick again.

The heating is usually the first to go when he rages about how everything costs him too damn much.

It's a frequent complaint because the costs of heating a house of this size here in Hartford are significant.

I walk into the kitchen, bracing myself. But my father is nowhere to be seen. Instead, my sister sits at the kitchen counter, absorbed in her phone.

My mother turns from the stove, her eyes hazel lighting up. She brushes off her aprons and hurries toward me.

"There you are, Chickadee," she greets me warmly. She hugs me hard, kissing my cheek. When she pulls back, there are tears in her eyes. "It's been too long since I've last laid eyes on you."

I pat her cheek. "You look good, Mom." My gaze slides around the kitchen and dining room. "Shouldn't the cook be doing your job?"

My mother flushes as she steps back, shaking her head. She heads back to the stove. "Esmerelda was let go a couple of weeks back. Your father caught her and the new maid stealing." She clucks her tongue as she pulls oven mitts on. "I mean, can you believe the nerve of some people?"

My father usually discovers that his housemaids are treacherous once per season; it happened so often during my childhood that I could almost time it down to the week. I feel bad for the servants who are hired here, to put it bluntly.

"Well. It smells good in here," I say, changing the subject.

My mother blushes and smiles at me. "Thank you, Chickadee. We should be ready to eat soon."

Slipping my backpack off, I carry it over to the bar where my sister is sitting. I set my stuff on the ground and slide into a seat.

"How is school going, Hazel?" I ask politely.

She doesn't even look up from her phone. "Better than it did for you, I assume."

I squint at her words. She's almost certainly a worse student than I was. Ballet academies don't screw around when it comes to grades. Mine was no

different.

"Girls, be nice," my mother says. "Hazel, we only have Kaia here once a month. Let's keep it civil."

Hazel looks up at me and sticks out her tongue. I flip her the bird and she immediately tells on me. "Mom! Kaia just told me to go fuck myself!"

"I swear, you two," Mom says, whirling around. "Quit it, both of you."

My dad's steps suddenly break the tension, sounding like thunder coming down the stairs. I bite my lip. Hazel smirks.

My mother tucks her hair behind her ear nervously. We all turn toward the doorway, waiting. Three little arrows, primed and quivering, just waiting for him to release us.

Eventually he stalks into the room, muttering angrily. Tall, blond, and heavyset, my father is dressed in khakis and a white polo. He rakes his hand through his thinning hair and glances at the three of us.

"That was the fourth call I've gotten that was pre-recorded JUNK!" he declares. "I've told you time and time again, Serena. You sign up for these..." He makes a gesture. "These lists and then I'm left getting my fucking phone called twenty times a day! It's fucking ridiculous!"

My mother doesn't even blink at the accusation in his tone. "They are the worst. I'm sorry, honey."

My father hikes his belt up, shaking his head. "I'm not dealing with that shit anymore, Serena. You can't expose us like that."

My mother nods, as if he's giving her sage advice. Before his barb even lands, he's already swinging his gaze around to Hazel and me. "Why are you dressed so casually, Kaia? In this house, we have a dress code."

I struggle to keep my feelings off my face. "I didn't know, Dad. I'm sorry."

He takes a couple steps closer. "Your sister and your mother are wearing skirts. I expect you to dress up like a woman when you want to come to dinner here."

This is entirely new since the last time I visited, just over a month ago. I swallow, bobbing my head. "Yes, sir."

My mother hastily turns to us with a platter of roast chicken and vegetables clutched between two potholders. "Why don't we sit down and eat?"

My father gives me a look as I stand up, shaking his head on the way to the formal dining room table. The table is long and glossy, laid with an

extensive place setting for each of us, undoubtedly my mother's doing. Dad sits at the head of the table and my mom hurries to set the chicken down in front of him. Hazel and I take our places across from each other as he clears his throat and starts to carve.

My mom rushes back to the kitchen, retrieving several more dishes. My dad serves himself first, then Hazel. My mom sets a perfectly poured pint of beer at his place, then scurries to her seat.

My dad takes a bite of his food, seeming to forget that my mother and I are yet to be served. I stand and move to grab the platter of food. My dad growls at me, his mouth still full.

"Manners, Kaia!"

Hazel smirks at me, picking up her fork and putting a piece of chicken in her mouth. It takes my father another minute to serve me and my mom tiny portions of chicken and vegetables.

"I'm trying to help you both out here," he says, passing our plates back. "You both tend toward having fat asses. You guys both take after Serena's mother, who was herself practically a fucking cow. She was disgusting."

I glance toward my mother. I've never seen my mother bigger than a size two except when she was pregnant. But she just smiles benevolently down the table at my father, like he's really doing something great for her.

"Thank you, Robert. You always look out for us," she says. She glances around the table. "All of us should be very thankful."

Hazel has a piece of chicken hanging from her mouth when she mumbles, "Thanks, Dad!"

"Thank you," I echo quietly.

I look down at my plate, eying the tiny portions with a silent sigh. No sooner have I sliced a tiny piece of chicken off and popped it into my mouth does my father begin.

"When do you graduate again?" he asks, putting an elbow on the table. He spears a huge bite and chews it with relish.

"At the end of January."

"And when do you hear back from New York Ballet?"

My cheeks turn pink. "I don't know. I haven't gotten my audition date yet. There are a lot of factors, like how many more people they have auditioning after me."

He points his fork at me. "That's not good enough, Kaia. I need a date."

I swallow, dropping my eyes. "I'll try to find out, Dad."

“Good. I don’t want to have to ask you again,” he grunts.

“She is probably too busy with her social life to even pay attention to something like an important deadline,” Hazel says cattily.

I huff a laugh. “Social life? Have you never seen how much I practice? There is barely enough time left over for me to sleep.”

My dad fixes me with a glare. “I don’t like sarcastic comments or snark in my house, young lady. Now apologize to your sister.”

I give Hazel a dead-eyed stare. “Sorry.”

My father isn’t finished, though. He sets his fork down and leans in. “I would hope that you would have some fucking manners by now. I’ve spent almost twenty years and hundreds of thousands of dollars on your education and training as a dancer.”

My neck heats. “Yes, sir. I plan to repay you every cent.”

Everyone goes quiet. The idea of me earning that much money in my whole lifetime does seem absurd, on its face.

“Unless you have a check for the whole amount, I’m not interested. And I know that you will never have that kind of money. I mean, look at yourself, Kaia. You’ll never be worth anything to anyone outside of this family.”

My cheeks burn. He’s right, of course. It does seem impossible.

I sneak a glance at my mother. She is chewing quietly, looking at her plate. No help is forthcoming from that quarter, not that I’m the least bit surprised.

My dad clears his throat and shoots me a glare.

“You’re using the wrong goddamn fork. Did I not send you to cotillion and spend my hard earned money on you learning basic table manners?” He shakes his head, disgusted. “You should be a lady, like your sister.”

I arch a brow at Hazel. She smirks at me, piling her fork full of potatoes. “Yeah, Kaia. You should at least try, even if we all know you’ll fail. You can’t help the fact that you suck.”

“Don’t say suck at the table,” my mother corrects Hazel stiffly. “Kaia hardly ever comes home. Why don’t we all change the subject to something more upbeat?”

My father, ever the drama queen, stands up to make his point. “I’ll talk about whatever I damn well please, Serena. I put food on the table and clothes on the backs of everyone present.”

My mom gives him a soft smile. “Of course you do, honey. Thank you for all that you do for us.”

Hazel and I mumble thank you as one.

My father sits down. “You’re welcome. Just the other day, I was telling the guys in my foursome at the golf course about how much I do for my family. I said that you had all found me and thanked me within the last few days. Doug called bullshit, and I had to set him straight.”

He shovels food in his mouth, talking anyway. “I said Doug, just because no one is thankful for what you provide doesn’t mean that the same can be said about yours truly. Maybe my family is just better at showing gratitude than yours is.”

I school my expression into one of interest. But underneath, my guts churn. This is exactly why I don’t come home if I can help it. It always plays out the same way.

My father makes crude remarks. My sister eggs him on. And my mother supports it in the most non-confrontational way she can.

I do the best I can for the rest of the visit. That means I nod when I’m supposed to agree and only fill in details when asked. I revert to the person I was years ago, back when I still lived here full time.

I try to blend in with the wallpaper and not draw attention to myself. My father and Hazel shoot spiteful comments at me. I try to dodge them and not let the barbs hurt me.

That’s the only way I know of to get by in this house.

At last, as the sun starts to set, I get ready to leave. My mom hugs me hard. Hazel makes some snide comment about how I’m putting on weight.

It just makes me really, really tired.

At last, I go over to hug my father. It’s important that he see me as a doting daughter; anything more than that is considered rebellious.

“Bye, Daddy,” I say, kissing him on the cheek.

He grabs me by the shoulders, staring down into my face. “You had better ace your audition with New York Ballet, Kaia. I haven’t supported you for this long just to have you falter when the goal is within reach.”

My eyes widen. I blink convulsively. “Yes, sir.”

“I mean it,” he says, giving me a sharp shake. “I won’t have you taking some position with some far away place. You have trained for too long and cost me too much money to just blow it. You had better be the best damn ballerina they have ever seen. Or else.”

The menace in his tone gets heavier the longer his sentence goes on. My eyes fill with tears, but I won't let them fall.

"Yes, sir."

He waves me off like I've displeased him. I grab my backpack and I'm out of the front door like a rocket. I'm almost out of the yard before I hear my mother's voice.

"Kaia!"

I slow, then turn back. She stands in the doorway, wringing her hands. There seems to be something that she wants to say.

There always seems to be something left unsaid with her. Several seconds pass as she tries to make up her mind about what she wants to say.

"Mom, I have to catch my bus," I say.

Her lips twist with a hint of bitterness. She looks down and shrugs. "Good luck on your audition, sweetheart."

I suck in a deep breath, my eyes filling with tears again. "Thanks, Mom."

She waves, looking so desolate and sad. I've long since learned that I can't help her; she loves this life that has her ensnared, keeps her shackled to this godawful house.

Turning, I start walking toward the bus stop, my tears just now beginning to fall.

CALUM

“Sir, please. Be still so I can work on this knot.” Hugo, my extremely patient physical therapist, pushes his hands flat against my bare back.

I open my eyes a slit. I can see myself reflected back in the mirrors that line the walls of my private gym. Lying on my stomach, I have a pained expression.

“Go on,” I grunt, closing my eyes once more.

Hugo presses his hands against my flesh, rubbing small circles with his fingers. He comes to the knot again and his massaging only intensifies.

It hurts like a bitch as he works his hands over the knot, trying to loosen it.

“I can tell you’re thinking about the knot,” Hugo chides. “Remember, you should think calming thoughts.”

I sigh and turn my head away. Hugo has been my physical therapist for almost six years, ever since I tore the anterior cruciate ligament in my right knee.

That’s an injury that no dancer ever comes back from; one that saw me, at age twenty two and half, hurt and unsure of my future. With the help of hindsight, I’m glad that I got injured. It spurred me on, made me figure out how I was going to feed myself and keep Lucas in ballet academy.

But at the time, I thought my life was over.

Hugo finally finishes torturing me, patting me on the shoulder. “Okay. You can get up.”

I turn myself over, grimacing and rotating my shoulder in its socket a few times. I glance up and see my reflection again.

Painted across the flesh and muscle of my chest, just to the left of my heart, are two tight white clusters. Once upon a time they were bullet marks, each entering my chest just shy of piercing my heart.

Now they are healed, the skin gone from pink and tinkered to white and shiny.

I hop up off the table and grab a black t-shirt, pulling it over my head. Hugo is already folding the table up and moving it back to its out of the way spot.

I bob my head. “See you on Tuesday, Hugo.”

Hugo smiles. “I look forward to it.”

He vanishes out the swinging doors to my gym. I roll my neck and rotate my shoulder again, still feeling stiff. Then I walk over to a rack of free weights, picking up a twenty pounder.

As I begin doing curls, the doors behind me swing open again. This time it’s not Hugo but my brother Lucas.

And he has a displeased look on his face.

“Where were you?” he asks, annoyed.

I roll my eyes and focus on the weight. “You’ll have to be more specific than that if you actually want an answer.

His fists tighten. “You know what I mean, Calum. You said that you would be at the Indica Tech board meeting this morning. I was counting on your vote.”

Setting the weight down, I turn my head toward him. “Just do whatever you want to do, Lucas. The world isn’t waiting around for you to get approval. The sooner you learn that, the better.”

A muscle flexes in his cheek. “If you were just going to say that, why didn’t you do it earlier? This project has been moving at a fucking snail’s pace for months.”

I suck in a breath. “You’re supposed to be my second in charge. That means that you can do anything you want with the company. I’m the only person with the power to veto you. What more could you possibly want?”

Lucas shakes his head. “You’re such an asshole.”

I trot over to the wooden bench where my water bottle is, taking a sip. Checking the time, I am glad to see that it’s almost eight at night.

The time which I can go back to Club X. I’ve been waiting for this.

“Is there something that you wanted?” I ask my brother distractedly.

He pushes his tongue out with his cheek. “Who is she?”

I cock my head at him. “I’m sorry?”

He makes a gesture with one hand, opening his palm to the sky and flapping it closed several times. “You’ve been avoiding work lately. The only time you do that is when you have your eye on some new girl. So who is she? Is she a ballerina or is she one of your whores?”

I shoot him a baleful look. “Get fucked, Lucas.”

He chuckles, his expression reminding me of our father. “So she’s a pro, then. God, what happened to you that you turned out so fucked up?”

I turn cold as ice. “Lucas, get the fuck out of my house.”

Lucas doesn’t get to judge me for the women I sleep with.

He eases back, holding up his hands. “I just came to tell you that you have a message at the answering service that’s from Anita. Apparently it’s been there for some time.”

I look down at my fists, which closed tight at the sound of her name. “I know.”

He rolls his eyes. “You should answer it. Or at least listen to it. Jesus.”

I keep my expression blank. “Are you done?”

“You’re a dick today,” he huffs. He turns and disappears out the swinging door again.

I turn and look at myself in the mirror. I look like a little boy, clothing his water bottle, all mad at the world.

Walking toward my reflection, I hurl the water bottle. It hits the surface and explodes, distorting my image for a moment as the water runs down the wall.

Inside I’m writhing with anger, absolutely furious at the fact that Anita even had the fucking nerve to reach out. Not only that, but she obviously called my brother when no response was apparently forthcoming.

Her using Lucas really turns my stomach all over again.

She should know better. Then again, she’s a snake. How can I expect a snake not to poison everything within its reach?

The only other option is to tell my brother exactly how I got Anita to take us in after our parents died... and that’ll happen as soon as hell fucking freezes over.

I close my eyes, struggling for control. I learned so much of it in ballet, perfect control of my physical being.

But mental control...

That’s something else entirely.

I open my eyes as Club X wishes back into my consciousness.
Cerise in right there, at the top of my mind.
I'm going to make her mine tonight, no matter how much it costs. And
then I'll be so distracted that all thoughts of Anita will flee.
Growling to myself, I turn and start to walk out of the gym.

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KAIA

Thud, thud, thud.

My heartbeat is so loud that it almost drowns out the music.

I'm onstage at Club X, on my knees in the middle of the stage, listening to the last notes of my song. The top of my bikini is somewhere behind me; the bottoms are just in front of me. Whistles and cheers come from the audience; my face heats as the music shifts.

Climbing to my feet, I gather all the cash I can carry, making sure I pick up my suit at the same time. I run off the stage and dump everything down on a tall bar table put there for just that reason. As fast as I can, I rush out onto the floor. I see several men wave me over, raising their black plastic cards at me. My eyes rove over them, trying to pick between them.

One of the guys pops up, grinning. He's blond and young, his Harvard sweatshirt and acne-spotted cheeks dead giveaways. He leers at me as he comes over, waving his black card. "Hey! I want a lap dance from you. I have a room..."

I smile lightly. He seems pretty drunk. But half the guys in here are the same. "Sure. Lead the way."

I grab onto his arm to stop him from literally running. He flushes at my touch and slows it way, way down. I strut my stuff into the back, where the private rooms are located.

Okay, rooms might be overselling the place a bit. They are small black booths with room for no more than three people; I notice that the camera that points into the room follows us.

I push him down on the hard bench, feeling strangely loose. It's rare to get someone my age as a customer. Maybe just knowing that he's very

human and visibly shaking helps me relax.

I press a button by the door and take his black card, sliding it into a slot. His choice of music begins to play, some seriously raunchy rap.

I smile and begin to dance for him. "What's your name, sweetie?"

He bites his lip, his gaze hard on my breasts. "Mike."

He reaches out and grabs me around the waist. Instinctively I push him back, shaking my head. "That's not how this works. You don't touch me."

He rolls his eyes. "Come on. We both know that you're going to get on your knees and suck my dick. Just go ahead and do it already. There's no need to wind me up first."

I paste on a smile but stop dancing. "I think you have the wrong idea. We don't do that here."

I turn my head and start to pull his card from the door. When I turn around, he's coming right at me. "Don't be a stuck up bitch. We both know you want it."

He unzips his pants and flashes me his penis, which is laughably small. He arches his eyebrow, as if he's daring me to touch it.

Before I can even push the hidden panic button, a big burly security guard is already behind me. "Everything okay in here?"

I step backward, out of the booth. "I think it would be best if this guy left."

"Wait a second!" the young guy protests. "I want what I paid for!"

I turn and walk out of the back area as quickly as I can. Unease settles around my shoulders like a cape, prickling me. My mouth quivers.

It's not that I'm afraid what would have happened back there. The management keeps their eyes on everyone and everything. If I were to believe Mia, they keep a lookout for people trying to cut them out of profits.

But for stuff like this?

I'm beyond glad that they are looking out for me, no matter what their motivation is.

I stop in the middle of the hallway, giving myself a hard shake. *This is part of it*, I chide myself. *This is exactly what you signed up for when you took this job. Now get a hold of yourself!*

I paste a smile on. Blowing a deep breath out, I start moving again. Before I even make it all the way back onto the floor, the manager Sam comes to find me.

He doesn't even blink at the fact that I'm scrambling to get my mind straight. He just sniffs, adjusts the waist of his black pants, and looks at me through jaundiced eyes. "You were good onstage. You do that dancing ballet thing and the whole room goes nuts. It's one of the best acts here."

My cheeks turn beet red. "Oh. Uh, thanks."

He seems not to notice, or maybe it's just that he doesn't care. "Mr. X is here again."

I look up at him, my eyes going wide. "He is?"

He nods. "Yup. He just headed up to the platinum room with a bottle of our most expensive whiskey. He asked that you entertain him again."

My heart gives a little flutter in my chest. "Oh! Well... I will head upstairs now."

Sam holds up a black pair of pointe shoes. "He wants you to wear these."

My cheeks flame scarlet as I pluck them from his grasp. "Thank you."

I climb the stairs, my heart in my throat. A giddy little voice in the back of my head is babbling about how Mr. X is here to see me.

But no. He's not.

I have to remember that he's here to see Cerise, who's more confident and self-assured than me by a mile. It's a show I put on, a diversion.

No one is interested in plain little me and it's best that I remember that.

Swallowing tightly, I climb the last step to the Platinum room. Lifting my chin and planting a demure smile on my face, I see Mr. X's dark figure through the open doorway.

He's a little more disheveled this time. His tie is loosened at his neck, his dark suit jacket is thrown aside casually. When he sees me, his eyes light up like twin sapphires, sparkling dangerously.

I step into the room, closing the door behind myself. "Hello, you."

He smirks, his eyes dropping to take in my whole body. "I couldn't stay away," he husks out.

The deep timbre of his voice gives me goosebumps. I press a button near the door to turn on my music. It's low and rhythmic, making me sway along.

I smile and bend down, making quick work of swapping my stripper heels for pointe shoes.

When I finish tying them on, I stand, giving them a test. I lie and then do an arabesque. The slippers fit perfectly. Because of the variability of

sizes and shapes, it's nearly impossible to guess what size slipper someone is by just looking at them.

"How did you know what size to get?" I ask, walking across the room in slow steps.

He smiles coolly. "You ask too many questions, beauty."

I stop when I'm inches away from him, tossing my hair and posing. "Did you miss me?"

Mr. X leans forward, looking me right in the eye and running his fingertips oh so lightly up my knee toward my hip. I sink my top teeth into my bottom lip.

I should push his hand away just as I did to the boy downstairs. I should put up hard boundaries and stick to them, be firm like Mia taught me.

Yet I don't. I just let him touch me, throwing back my head and swaying my hips to the music. He slides his hand around my back and gives me a tug.

I have to take a little of my power back. So I pluck his wrist up and drop it by his side. "You're just supposed to sit back and enjoy this," I say sweetly.

His eyes narrow on my face and his lips twist. But I shut him up by moving closer, putting my legs just inside his, and lifting my leg high over my head. His breath all leaves him in a soft grunt as his eyes travel up my body.

"Fuck," he mouths quietly. He reaches down to adjust his cock, leaving his hand on his lap. "You're killing me, Cerise."

The rush of emotion that I feel when he tells me that is addictive. I let my leg come down and kneel, my knees going wide as I straddle his lap.

He grabs my ass and pulls me down, grinding his cock between us. His eyes darken with need.

"God damn," he grits out.

I lean forward, placing my hands on either side of his chest and pushing him back. As I push him back, he lifts his hips, grinding against me again.

I know I'm not really meant to get turned on. But he does briefly brush his cock against my pussy in a way that makes me tingle. Without thinking I let out the softest moan, pressing my hips down as I gyrate against his lap.

"Oh fuck," he whispers, plowing his hand into my hair. He bucks against me, his eyes hard on my face. I bite my lip as my hips jerk against him; it's hard not to close my eyes.

“That’s it,” he says through clenched teeth. “Right there, beauty. Don’t stop.”

I feel a damp spot growing on the flimsy piece of fabric between my thighs. I can admit it, I am very excited right now, ready to tear my clothes off and...

And what?

Let him penetrate me?

My cheeks flush. I need to chill out before I end up accidentally having full blown sex right here, right now.

I don’t want to stop, don’t want to slow it down. But I slow the rolling of my hips, opening my eyes.

Mr. X is watching me closely, his hips lifting in time with my own. “Are you sure you want to stop?”

His question makes me blush all the way down to the roots of my hair. I suck in a breath and push off his brawny chest, trying to play it off. Admittedly, I’m a little wobbly as I step away from his lap.

I turn around, letting him look at my ass. “I thought you might appreciate a different view.”

He glances up at me, his gaze tightening on my face. But after a second he shrugs a shoulder and reaches out to touch my ass cheek. “Your ass is perfect. Do you know that?”

I blush as I bend down to touch the floor, using my hands to push up onto my tiptoes again. Mr. X seems to like that, shifting his weight and bringing his hand back to the crotch of his slacks.

“Tell me you’ll be mine,” he says, his voice gone to gravel. “Dance just for me. Let me be your patron, Cerise.”

I sway along with the music. “You’ll have to give me a better name to call you than Mr. X.” I say, smiling.

He smirks. “Sit on my lap right now, beauty, and I’ll whisper it in your ear.”

I grin and take a seat on his lap, twerking rhythmically. Instantly his hands land on my hips. His cock is pressed against my ass. He groans and leans forward, whispering in my ear.

“You can call me Calum.”

I reach back and knot my fingers in his nape, steady myself as my hips work. “Oh, Calum...” I let out the breathiest moan.

“Fuck, I’m going to—“

He thrusts almost violently against my back a few times then lets out a roar. I feel his cock twitch against my skin. A small wet spot soon spreads out between us. The sound of him finishing is somewhere between fascinating and terrifying, gratifying and sobering.

“Fuck me,” he says, chuckling against the bare skin of my shoulder. “That was...”

He trails off as I swallow and get up off of his lap. I’m not sure how to talk to him just now.

It’s not that I didn’t want him to... complete. It’s more that I don’t want him to expect it every time he comes to see me.

I’m not sure how to bring that up to him, so I busy myself taking off my ballet slippers instead.

He sprawls back against the leather booth, throwing a hand over his eyes. “I know that it’s frowned upon to come when you’re touching me.”

I set the slippers on the leather bench where he’s sitting, walking to my pair of heels. What am I supposed to say?

That I wanted him to come?

I did. But that doesn’t make it legal. It was prostitution, technically.

...right?

I slip on my heels without saying anything. He sits up, eyeing me. “Where were you trained, Cerise?”

I fumble with one of the straps to my heels. My heart starts beating loudly in my ears. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

He produces a shiny black card, holding it up as a present for me. When I stalk over to grab it, his free hand comes up and ensnares my wrist. “Yes, you do. It was somewhere good, I can tell you that much. Was it here in New York City?”

My eyes widen. Under no circumstances am I about to tell him a damn thing about my personal life. That’s dangerous territory.

“That’s way more than you need to know. Why don’t you leave something to the imagination?”

I pluck the card from his hand, my lips pasted in a frozen smile. He lets it go, his gaze narrowing on my face.

In the next moment, he sits back and shrugs. “Okay. How about you give me a phone number, then? I want to be able to call on you when I need you.”

Mia's voice erupts out of my throat. "When I see a signed contract, you can get me a phone."

Calum arches a brow. "Is that so?"

I start back out of the Platinum room. "That's right."

His expression darkens. "You sure you know what you're signing up for? You won't work here. You will only dance for me, beauty. Whenever and where I want it."

Swallowing, I nod. "I know."

I turn and flee down the stairs, my head full of contradictory thoughts.

I just gained a patron... but I won't sacrifice my privacy to keep him, if I can help it.

CALUM

Two days later, I'm standing by the studio's only window, frowning out into the inky blackness. Basil is in the opposite corner and between us are the current group of dancers. Basil leans down close to one ballerina, his black-clad body looking rather like a knife.

"You can leave," he tells her. He looks her up and down, his expression severe. "Your pirouettes are disgraceful."

The twenty ballerinas and dancers surrounding her don't stop moving, even when she bursts into loud, sloppy tears. Basil turns on her classmates, sighing silently. He watches their movements like a hawk.

I fold my arms across my chest, my eyes tracing the dancers' arms. I can see that half of the dancers here are lacking in the natural grace with which Honor was so proudly blessed. There are also a lot of nerves right now.

Even though the class has been instructed to impress Basil and not worry about me, I am getting plenty of looks. Not because I'm handsome. Not because I'm rich, though I'm sure that's part of it.

No, they are looking at me because it was announced earlier today that I will be directing all of the spring productions.

And I won't be pulling a single punch.

"Stop!" I call out, shaking my head. I look to the corner where the piano player sits. "Stop playing."

The room is abruptly silent. All eyes are on me. I walk to the middle of the room. Several dancers back away, making room though I ask for none. I look around, pushing my cheek out with my tongue.

“This is going to be the last combination we’re going to do tonight. I would suggest that if you’re going to impress me, the time to start doing that would be right the fuck now.”

I look to the piano player, signaling him with one hand. He starts playing the same notes, a lively Chopin number.

I draw myself up, starting in first position. As I execute each move, I call out to the class. “Ladies! You start with a this, a this, into a this. Then you’ll do four pirouettes and finish with a big jump. As wide and exaggerated as you can.”

The ballerinas nod, most looking tense.

“Gentlemen! You should begin by the wall...” I head for the wall and the dancers get out of my way. I ready myself, starting in first position once more. “Move, move, move. Pirouette, rond de jambs, arabesque, hold it... for... as... long... as... you... can.”

I finish with a little bow. The male danseurs look a little shocked that they are being asked to do an arabesque, which is traditionally considered a ballerina’s move.

But if they are to be compared to the ballerinas, I need to see them do the same thing.

I start clapping time. “Come on. Let’s go. Ladies, line up. One and two and three and...”

I watch the ballerinas and dancers twirl and hold their poses for the next few minutes. I’m looking for strength and beauty, grace and expressiveness.

When the last note is played, I call to the piano player. “Thank you. You can go.”

I turn my eyes on the class again, frowning. “You can go too. Rosters of those staying with the company will be posted tomorrow morning.” I dismiss them with a wave.

The dancers all take off at a run, whispering amongst themselves. Soon the room is empty but for Basil and me. I lean down and rub my right knee, feeling the ugly surgical scars.

Basil walks over, nodding to my knee. “Giving you trouble, is it?”

I snort. At the moment, I’m in real pain. It arcs down from my knee like white hot sparks, burning and tight. “Something like that.”

He jerks his head over to the long wooden bench. “Let’s sit, then. You can tell me what you thought.”

I move stiffly over to the bench and drop on it, rubbing my knee. “You had to know that last batch was all but useless. We’ve seen five classes today, ranked best to worst. And that was definitely the dregs.”

He plunks himself down, plucking his water bottle up. He looks thoughtful as he squeezes a little water into his mouth. “They weren’t great.”

I scoot down and raise my leg to lie out straight. Almost instantly, the burning pain subsides and leaves a low level throb. I’m so relieved I could almost cry.

“There were some hopefules in the first two classes,” I say, screwing up my face. “But there weren’t any that had it, if you know what I mean. I was looking for someone with star quality.”

Basil nods absently. “Someone to replace Honor.”

“Yes.” I rotate my shoulder, reminding myself to have RehabGuy look at it later. “When are you going to have the American Ballet Academy and the School of American Ballet try out?”

His eyebrows lift a little. Usually the company deals with that, not a patron or a guest director. “I think sometime next month, maybe.”

I roll my head over to him. “No. Make arrangements. I want people in here to audition tomorrow morning.”

He blinks. “Excuse me?”

I heave myself up off the bench with a groan. “Make it happen, Bas.”

As I walk away, he explodes.

“This isn’t your private tech company, Calum! You have everyone here running around like fools, desperate to please you. I’m telling you now, that won’t last.”

I roll my eyes. “I get shit done, Bas. I don’t have enough time in the day for all the niceties. I just tell people what is expected of them and fire them if they can’t or won’t comply.” I lean over, scoop up my duffel bag, and sling it over my shoulder. Then I glance back.

“Someday, you’ll meet some girl that makes you fall to your knees. And she won’t behave according to your rules.” He favors me with a twisted smile. “Then we’ll see who is crying uncle.”

I shake my head, walking toward the door. “Love is for people who are foolish enough to have hearts. Meanwhile, I’ll be here tomorrow morning, bright and early. So you’d better start sounding the alarm right now, because

there had better fucking be a shitload of dancers for me to judge when I get here.”

“Calum—“ Bas calls. But I hit the doorway, checking my phone.

I grumble a little. There are still no emails or missed calls from Club X. That means that they are still processing the rather lengthy contract that Cerise and I signed, officially making me her patron.

I drum my fingers on my thigh, then take an abrupt right turn into the men’s locker room. I run through a quick shower and change into a fresh white collared shirt and black pair of slacks. By the time I walk out of the changing room, I’ve settled on a plan.

Since Club X can’t offer me what I want, I’ll look elsewhere. As I push out the great glass doors and head into the cool night air, I quickly head for my waiting limo.

I climb in the back, not waiting for the driver to open the door. Tossing my gym bag aside, I look up toward the partition, which is rolled down.

“Sam, take me home. But pull up outside the Continental instead of into the parking deck. I want someone to make me a drink.”

My driver nods, already absorbed in pulling the car out of its spot.

It’s only a short drive to the enormous skyscraper where I own the penthouse. I slide out in front of the Continental, a sleek little cocktail bar that opened last spring.

Since the grand opening, I have spent many meetings and cocktail hours at the dimly lit, wood-paneled bar. Its menu is brief but memorable; the customers are either healthy people that either live in the area or people who want a really, really fancy gin and tonic. The uber rich mingle with the models and actresses and cocktail snobs.

It’s a fantastic place for hooking up, basically.

I stroll up to the door of the bar, swinging the door open. Hushed lighting greets me. The walls are all dark wood, lined with soft pink velvet banettes. I cast an eye over the bar as I approach. It’s an old airplane wing standing before towering shelves of colorful glass liquor bottles. There are probably fifteen seats at the bar and only ten of them are occupied.

Adjusting my cuffs, I slide into the first open seat I see. The bartender sees me and recognition lights his face. He heads over with a cocktail menu and a coaster.

“Good to see you, Mr. Fordham. What can I get for you?”

I don't even have to think about that. "An old-fashioned."

He bows his head. "What kind of whiskey do you want in that?"

I sit back in my seat. "Elijah Craig or something comparable."

"Right away," he says, reaching for a rocks glass.

I turn my attention toward the rest of the bar, where a large group of young girls in high end dresses are now gathering. I watch as one girl orders. Her friends notice me and a couple of them blush, making eye contact.

Like I said before, it's pretty easy to pick up a hot stranger here. The bartender puts my drink down, but I'm busy narrowing my selection. Sipping my drink, I look back and forth between a blonde and a brunette.

The brunette makes up my mind by getting her martini and taking the empty seat next to mine. She takes a sip of her drink, looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

I lean closer, smirking. "I'm Calum. And you are... not a regular here, I'm guessing?"

She blushes, shaking her head and smoothing her hand down the front of her little black dress. "I'm Olivia. And no, I'm from Philadelphia. I'm just in town for my friend's bachelorette party."

My eyes narrow, my smirk grows more pronounced. It couldn't be more perfect if I'd written her lines out for me.

I pick up my glass, nodding to it. "Have you had their old fashioned yet? Everybody should have one once."

Olivia smiles coyly and tucks a strand of her curly hair behind her ear. "Why no. Do you want to order me one, Calum?"

Twenty minutes of chitchat and two drinks later, I'm pulling the brunette down a dark hallway in the back of the bar. She kisses me first as I elbow my way into a dimly lit bathroom with a dazzling floor to ceiling mirror. She isn't a very good or very experienced kisser, her hesitation obvious.

She giggles, tipsy and enthusiastic, as I press her against the back of the door. Her lips are warm and rubbery under mine. I can feel her hand shyly exploring my belt.

Without speaking, I back her against the sink. Here too I am reflected as I unbuckle my belt.

The brunette rips my shirt out of my slacks, her eyes dark with need and full of hunger. I feel nothing except a faint throb from my cock. I push her

down to kneel on the floor as I free my cock, staring at myself in the mirror.

If I'm honest about it, watching myself get my dick sucked is most of the reason why I always come here when I'm looking for some action.

She puts my cock in her mouth. It feels good, although she does keep nipping me accidentally.

"Cover your teeth," I murmur, dropping my head back. "Use your hand."

I guide her hand to the base of my cock. She comes up for air, breathing hard. "Maybe you should just fuck me?"

Suppressing an eye roll, I yank her to her feet and turn her around, pushing her against a wall. I roll on a condom then take her panties down to her knees. Stepping close, I pull up her dress as press my cock against her ass.

I still feel nothing, although I do have a hard on. Then again, I almost always have a hard on, so...

Running my fingers along the curves of her ass and down to her pussy lips, I turn my head. The only way that I can get off is by watching myself in the mirror, essentially watching porn of myself.

I fit my cock to her entrance and thrust in deep. She makes a strangled sound. I stare at my reflection, unable to stop the hatred from surfacing. I fuck this girl with all the vitriol I feel for myself.

Fucking useless, I think, thrusting deep.

She holds on and moans. I punctuate each thrust with a thought.

Fucking.

Waste.

Of.

Space.

I grit my teeth, hammering my cock home over and over again.

There are a thousand reasons why you're all alone, I think, glaring at my reflection.

You're.

So.

Fucking.

Weak.

Look at you. You're broken. You'll always be alone.

I'm not even making a half-hearted attempt at paying attention to the girl. My eyes are laser-locked on my reflection, sneering.

“I think I’m going to—“ the brunette husks out. Then her pussy spasms around my cock. She lets out a strangled scream as she comes.

I’m nowhere near finishing. And yet, I pull out of her body, stepping back. It’s a matter of seconds before I get the condom off my dick.

“I fucking hate condoms,” I mutter.

The brunette, whose name at this point I can’t even vaguely recall, blushes. “Well, I’m clean if you—“

Disgusted, I toss the condom in the trash and start zipping up. “That’s vile.”

Her eyes widen as I leave, banging the door open. “Wait—“

But I’m done.

Done with condoms, done with sketchy bathroom fucks. I exit the back way and walk through the echoing marble lobby, my mouth a grimace.

I need to see Cerise again.

I know that she has the right combination of tits and ass and hazel eyes. She’ll make me come without even touching me.

And until I can fucking blow my load, I’m going to be an absolute fucking terror...

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KAIA

As I step out onto the stage of the New York Ballet, my feet and legs tingle. I can't keep the grin off my face. Ella is right behind me, finding a spot and sitting down to put on her toe pads and pointe shoes.

I bend down, putting my own toe pad and shoes on. Mine are in terrible shape; I definitely should've worn a newer pair of shoes. But a new pair of shoes wasn't in the budget this week.

These have to last four more wears.

I straighten, looking at the empty theatre. From where I'm standing, it's easy to imagine the roar of excited applause, the hot lights, the other ballerinas watching from the wings.

I blow out a breath. Ella looks up at me. "Are you okay, Kaia?"

I wrinkle my nose. "Honestly, I never thought I would make it this far. My goal this whole year has just been to get to this moment."

"Sit down and put your shoes on, boo. You look like a ghost. Get your shit together."

I wince, but she is right.

She seems to be murmuring something to herself. I plunk down beside her and retape my third and fourth toes, pulling a face as I look at my feet.

All dancers have calluses on their feet. But ballet dancers have it the worst, especially ballerinas. I slip on my toe pads and put my pointe shoes on, fastening them.

"Be comfortable," I whisper, shooting them a glare.

Ella glances over at me as she gets to her feet. "Can you believe we are here right now, about to audition?"

I spring to my feet, looking at the other twenty dancers. Everyone is practically vibrating right now. The nervous energy is almost palpable.

I stretch my right hamstring. “Can you believe that they fired the company’s prima ballerina and most of the corps? When I saw that they were auditioning for forty spots...”

Ella smiles coolly. “We need those spots.”

She takes first position, doing a series of plies.

I look at her, dead serious. “God, what if we actually get called back?”

Ella pulls a face. “Of course we’re going to get called back. We dance literally eight to twelve hours per day, six days a week. We deserve it.”

I flush, looking down. If I did the math, I am absolutely sure that I dance literally every minute I wasn’t asleep or commuting. But I don’t say any of that.

“Yeah,” is all that comes to mind.

Ella stands up straight and adjusts her dark blue leotard. She nods toward the back of the theatre, where a dark haired woman in a blue skirt suit and a short blond man in a white tank top and black capri tights approach us. The man claps his hands loudly; he’s obviously a teacher, because he seems used to holding court.

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen,” he says, coming down right before the stage. “I am the head instructor here, Basil Smith. And this—“

The woman cuts in stepping forward. “I’m Emma Rosenberg. I’m the head of the board that oversees every action undertaken by this company.”

Basil gives her a long look. “Yes.” He turns his attention to the group on stage. “Your director is running late, it seems. He’s not polite enough to let anyone know about his tardiness—“

“Basil,” Emma chides.

He climbs up on the stage, looking annoyed. “But never fear. Emma and I will be judging. Also, I think someone is filming this audition.” He looks behind him, searching for how that is happening.

“What my colleague is saying is that you should be your absolute best self, starting right now.” Emma backs away from the stage, hurrying to find a seat in the fourth row.

An older woman comes out on the stage and finds a seat at the piano.

I can’t quite feel my legs because I’m so full of nerves.

You’d better make it in New York, my father’s voice sounds loudly in the back of my head.

Pushing that thought down, I try to concentrate. This is all about me, here and now. There's no room in my head for Basil or Emma, Ella or my dad. It's all about me, my talent, my precision and skill.

I just need to keep reminding myself of that.

"Line up four across," Bas barks, clapping his hands. "Girls in the front, boys in the back. Let's move, people." He narrows his gaze at all of us. "God, try to act like you've all been in a chorus line before."

I scurry into place beside Ella, my heartbeat going wild. Deep breaths. *You can do this*, I say to myself.

Basil waves at the accompanist, who starts playing Tchaichovsky. He looks at everyone flatly. "Let's start very simply. Pas de chevalier to point. Tendu side in fondu. Close to fifth position. Okay?"

No one says anything, so he sighs. "And one, two, three, four..."

Never in my entire life have I arched by arms so high, moved so quickly, or stretched my leg back quite so elegantly. The moves are accomplished in the blink of an eye.

I look to Basil, who raises his eyebrows at the group. "Good. Again."

I do it a second time, finishing with a perfectly shaped arabesque. After I'm done, my heart pounds in my ears.

Am I actually... good at this?

It feels like I'm killing it so far.

"Okay, now I would like to see something more complex," Basil says. He walks to the back of the stage, starting in fifth position. Then he proceeds through a combination with a pirouette in the middle and ending with a grand jeté. "And five six, seven, eight. One, two, three, four. And five six, seven, eight..."

My heartbeat rises. Every single move he executed is flawless, not that I expected any less. Toward the back of the theatre, the door swings open and a man enters.

But I'm too focused on what I'm doing to pay him any mind.

"Let's go!!" Basil yells, clapping. "On my cue. One, two, three, and—"

The first line goes. I cue up right behind, trying to focus my attention on the moves.

"One, two, three, and—"

Like a puppet come to life, I am suddenly smiling and dancing. I keep my movements smooth and easy, doing a complex pirouette with several

turns and then leaping across the stage. My legs carry me far. I land right in center stage, beaming, and lift my arms.

This is it. This is the feeling that I'm supposed to have, I think to myself. That's when I suddenly make eye contact with him.

Eyes as dark blue as sapphire, and glittering just like two gems. Dark hair, grown a little overlong, shoved back from his face. High cheekbones, a jawline that could cut diamonds, a cruel yet perfect pout.

And that big, rugged, sinful body that I know all too well. The very same one that I dreamed about riding last night.

Mr. X is here.

And he is glaring right at me.

Oh god.

All my worst fears, all in one place. The person who judges me is the very same one who I've been all but fucking at Club X. The same person that already inquired if I had training from a good ballet school, knowing perfectly well how taboo that is.

My smile falters, my arms droop. All the blood plummets to my feet.

“Get out of the way,” Bas snaps at me, waving his hand. “Next line, keep going...”

I manage to break his gaze and force my feet to carry me to the side of the stage. It’s only when Ella reaches out and mouths, “Are you okay?” that I realize I’m trembling.

I bob my head woodenly. There is no real reason to alarm Ella and I certainly do not want to draw any more scrutiny to myself.

“Let’s go again!” Basil calls out. “Same combination. Same lines. Let’s go, first group!”

I line up in the second group, automatically taking fifth position. I raise my arms and begin with the rest of my group. Somehow, though, the magic that I felt only a few minutes ago has disappeared like smoke. Now every leg lift is harder, my grand jetés less exaggerated. Even my pirouettes seem to take forever.

Everything slows down.

Knowing that I’m being watched by those searing deep blue eyes just makes all my steps clumsier, all my lifts less impressive. I can feel myself powering down.

Is this really happening to me right now?

I finish the combination a good four steps after the rest of my group. Basil looks me up and down, pushing out his lips in a dissatisfied expression. “Do better,” he warns.

I nod at him quickly, glancing out at Calum and Emma. Neither has much expression on their face. But Calum’s gaze is burning a hole through the middle of my torso.

I scurry to the side of the stage, turning away from that gaze. Ella comes to stand next to me, raising a brow as she glances back at our audience.

“Do you know him?” she asks in a hushed whisper.

I take a breath, trying not to panic. “Who?” I ask, all innocence.

She narrows her mahogany gaze at me. “Obviously I’m talking about the sexy guy standing next to Emma. He’s been glaring at you since he got here.”

Not wanting to risk a glance over my shoulder at Calum, I just shake my head. “Nope. Never seen him before.”

The lie burns as it leaves my mouth. Ella gives me hard look, knowing that something is up. But Basil claps his hands together, drawing her attention away.

“All right! Now it’s time for your solos. I know that you weren’t expecting to perform them quite so soon...” He shoots a cool look off the stage. I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean, but he quickly moves on. “Anyway, we need to see them now. You can line up right here and give the pianist your music. Then we’ll start.”

For a long second, nobody moves. It’s a sea of inexperienced, wide eyed kids, all looking to the others for reassurance. Then Ella clears her throat, grabbing my hand. “Right away, Basil. We’re ready to go with our solos.”

My cheeks flush as I let her pull me over to the other side of the stage. Everyone hurries to line up after me. Basil smiles coolly at Ella.

“Thank you. Are you ready?”

Ella nods, dropping my arm. She turns to the pianist and tells him to play a selection from Romeo and Juliet. The woman starts playing the beginning notes of the piece and Ella strides to a starting point, lifting her chin and smiling.

As I watch her dance, my stomach drops. She’s better than most of the dancers I know, better certainly than me.

Who isn’t better than you, little mouse?

I swallow against the whisper of my dad's voice. Blinking rapidly, I glare out off the stage, where Calum is staring me down.

I won't cry.

I can't.

This is my only chance.

Ella finishes her routine, bowing elegantly. There is a smattering of polite applause. Basil nods and turns to me. "Next?"

I clear my throat, turning to the pianist. "Would you please play the beginning of the second act of Giselle?"

The accompanist arches a brow at my choice of music; I've chosen one of the hardest pieces to perform for my solo.

She starts playing and I hurry to my place at the back of the stage. My heart is beating like a drum in my ears. It's almost hard to hear the music over it.

Luckily, I have practiced this exact piece thousands of times. Using nothing but muscle memory, I smile as I parade out, doing a dizzying number of pirouettes as I dash across the stage. All time stops. Everything just becomes about my breath, my limbs, my feet. Making sure I push myself into the next movement.

The music is very upbeat and I smile along as I do the arabesques and grand jetés that are required. I am moving too quickly to see any one particular person.

But when I come to center stage and pause for a moment, Calum is still standing there, staring at me like I am an insect to be crushed.

Holy shit.

The judgment I see written all over his expression is terrifying. I turn, pirouetting once more before I complete my three grand jetés off stage.

Somehow, I land slightly off balance coming out of the pirouette. Then I'm forced to try to overcompensate as I carry that force into the first jump.

And everything slides off kilter, suddenly. My timing is off; my feet don't seem to land in the place that they should. My legs are heavy, my arms near useless.

By the time I finish my solo, I can feel tears brimming in my eyes. I still turn and curtsy to signal that I am done. And there is a scattered bit of applause. I look toward Basil, my heart thundering in my ears.

He looks at me, his mouth twisting like he just ate something bitter. "Your ending could really use some work, honey."

My heart wrenches. The sob that has been barely contained in my chest flows up and out of my throat.

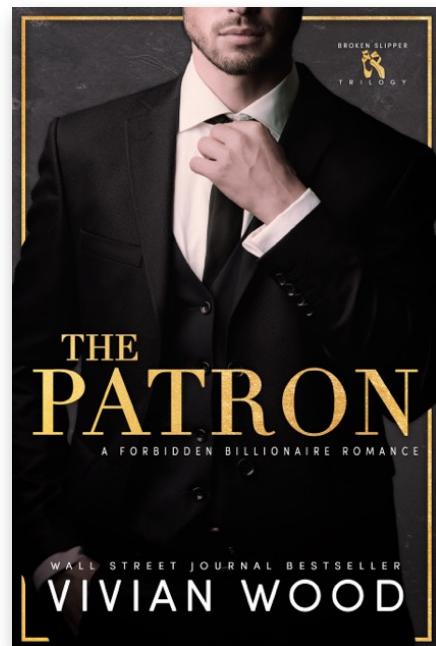
I crumple, turning and running offstage.

I finally had my big chance... and I fucking blew it. Openly sobbing, I run away from the stage, pointe shoes and all.

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Vivian likes to write about troubled, deeply flawed alpha males and the fiery, kick-ass women who bring them to their knees.

Vivian's lasting motto in romance is a quote from a favorite song: "Soulmates never die."

Be sure to follow Vivian through [her Instagram](#) or [join her email list](#) to keep up with all the awesome giveaways, author videos, ARC opportunities, and more!

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