

Before he was
the Devil's Pet...
He was mine.

Wicked

USA Today & Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author
AMO JONES



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Wicked
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To my sissy Amie, I love you. I love your friendship and your soul.

Last but not least, to YOU! Oh, Reader. Thank you for reading my book. I promise not to hurt you too much...

To myself. Because I just lied. It's going to hurt.

To the kids who were told that they would never amount to anything
because they liked breaking the rules.

Fuck the haters.

I typed this with my middle finger.

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Wicked

She stared at me from across the room. It was the exact reason why I loved her. She was reckless with her need for me. She didn't give a fuck who was watching. I felt it, she sure as fuck felt it, and I'm one thousand percent everyone in this goddamn room felt it.

My glass was half full. Whiskey. The kind that resembles love. Burns you right down to the core of your guts all while discreetly destroying other bodily organs in the process. Love was a distraction to destruction. Nothing more, and nothing less. My knee wouldn't stop jiggling and my palms started to sweat. I simply wanted to fucking kill someone. The room was too loud. The music too fucking messy. Even the band playing looked like they were three seconds away from OD'ing on coke. This wasn't what I expected at all from Ruby La Rosa. Do I even still know her? I don't have to know her to still love her. I was fucked the second she sank her poisonous fangs right into my jugular.

"Look, if it's any consolation, she looks happy, right?" Poppy leaned into me, resting her head on my shoulder. Lights pulsed rapidly to the

music, and I watched as her hand slowly lowered down his arm, resting in the palm of his hand.

My thumb twitched. I rolled my heavy steel ring around and around like a dial that controlled my temper and it was about to conflagrate.

“Happy?” I turned to face Poppy, ignoring everyone else around the table, including the owner of the hand that’s resting on my upper thigh beside me. “You and I both know that is not her happy. That is her...” I paused, reclining against my chair and resting my arm on the one beside me. “That is revenge.”

Jade interrupted across the table. The centerpiece was excessive, so I could only see the outline of her face. “That is no choice.”

Whacking away the grabby hands from below, I stood up from my chair, finishing my whiskey.

“Where are you going?” Khaos whined from beside Royce. I ignored all of them. Moving to the other side of the room, I strolled past Victor. The closer she got, the more I needed to fucking obliterate something. Preferably her.

One step.

Two.

Three.

I brushed past her just as her back was about to rub against my chest, our eyes colliding. Seconds passed before I finally dragged them away from her and headed through the back of the room, where an exit sign flashed above the door. Instantly, the cold air wrapped its frosty fingers around my throat as I shoved the door open. The fucking suffocation of everyone in that room.

Of her in *any* room.

“What is it? Is something wrong?” Her voice was like a flame that continued to burn too close no matter how much I tried to blow it out.

I reached around her little body and forced the emergency door closed behind her.

“Wicked!” She spun around, pushing on the door again before turning back to me. “You did that on purpose.” A glare flashed across her fiery honey-colored eyes. “Why? Why do you fucking do this and make it harder on both of us?”

My hand slid down the wooden door, bringing our bodies closer. She sucked in a breath, her eyes falling to my lips. “You’re making this worse

than it needs to be.”

Shaking my head, I brought the base of my finger to the side of her head, running it down her cheek and over her swollen lips. “Nah, but I’m about to.”

She parted her lips, and I slid my thumb between them, watching as they wrapped around the base. I retracted, lowering my lips down onto hers while grabbing her from her thighs and shoving her wedding dress up over her hips. Gripping on to the lace garter around her thigh, I tore it off and forced her against the door with my hips.

Her legs wrapped around my waist as I sucked on her tongue, swallowing her cries like poison, one I was willing to rot for. I slid my hands up the backs of her thighs, up to her ass, and spread her cheeks wide as she fumbled with my zipper, her hands working frantically between us.

“You wanted this,” she breathed into my mouth between tiny nibbles. “To fuck me in my wedding dress knowing I was marrying him.” My hand found her throat and I forced her head back so hard it bounced off the wood.

I glared down at her, just as she took out my cock and wrapped her tiny hand around the base, slowly stroking me between each breath. My hips bucked forward, riding her palm like I had her pussy. “You can marry whoever the fuck you want, Ruby. You’re always going to be mine.” I tensed around her throat. “Say you’re mine.”

She didn’t answer, her tongue sliding over her lip, hiding a wicked grin. Ruby was everything but easy. She’d work you up until you’re curled in a fucking corner, weeping your eyes out. But she wasn’t always like that. The hand that feeds you soon becomes the very same that takes you.

I reached into my pocket and grabbed the little metal object, pulling it out and pushing the tiny button on the side. The blade flicked out and I brought it to her throat, watching as the purple vein beneath her thin skin bounced beneath my touch.

“Say it, Ruby.” I hovered my lips over hers, groaning when my cock throbbed in the palm of her familiar hand. “You can be his wife, but you’ll always be my little slut.” I traced the outline of her vein with a steady hand, watching as blood pooled over the small incision.

Her legs tightened around my waist as I adjusted her body, whacking her hand out of the way and spitting on mine. I reached down between us, covering her smooth pussy with my hand and dipping my fingers deep inside of her. Her hips hitched forward and I squeezed her waist, forcing her

down over my cock. Her pussy tightened around my girth as I leaned forward and ran the tip of my tongue over the drop of blood gliding down her tanned neck, stopping at the curve of her delicate collarbone.

Pulling out, my eyes drifted closed as I felt her clench around me, fucking her harder until her body was jerking up the door. Her fingers found their way into my hair, forcing my face down onto hers. Our eyes collided as she rode over my length, holding me in place and paralyzing me with a simple fucking stare.

“You don’t fucking matter,” I growled over her lips, sinking my teeth into the bottom one before resting my head against hers. “I’m fucking you for me, not you. You’re gonna just fuck me until I say stop, because that’s all you’re good for. A tight fucking pussy with big ass tits.” I slammed into her so hard I could feel the curve of her cervix. “You’re just a dirty little whore that will always belong on my dick.” I slowed my pace but kept the thrusts forceful. “This how he fucks you, hmm?” I asked, pulling back just enough to search her hazel eyes. They’re damp from unshed tears, her cheeks pink, and her hair wild around her face. “Show me how he fucks you so I can fuck you harder.”

Her mouth parted slightly, her fingers wrapping around the back of my neck. “Please.”

“No,” I snapped, my finger digging into the cut on the side of her neck. “You’re fucking mine, Ruby—” I whispered into her mouth as her wet pussy tightened around me. “You’re my fucking toy. Only mine.” My balls tensed before exploding inside of her as her small body jerked around me. Hot cum shot out of my cock, but before it finished, I dropped her to the floor and finished on her wedding dress. Silence between us both, catching our breath.

“Was that my wedding gift?” Her chest rose and fell as she took in deep breaths, pushing her tits up to her chin.

Shots rang out from inside the building and her eyes flew up to mine in panic, her face paling.

“No.” My mouth curved up in a smirk. “That is.”



Wicked

Seventeen years old

Plates crash against the wall downstairs as Poppy snuggles deeper beneath my arms, tucking her face against my forearm. Yelling, screaming, more plates smashing. I hate it here. Poppy deserves better, and I want to give it to her. I will one day. I'm only seventeen right now, but I swear I will drag her out of this family if it's the last thing I do. Out of every family.

Long silence stretches out and I let my hands fall from Poppy's ears.

"Wait here." I throw my blanket off me just as Poppy's hand comes to mine.

"No, Lenny, I don't want you to go down there. We just have to wait. Remember what happened last time?"

"Yeah," I say, shoving on my shoes and grabbing the Glock that's tucked beneath the mattress of my bed. Stole it from him because I knew I'd need it one day. "I stopped it. Just stay here."

I don't give Poppy enough time to answer because I'm heading out my bedroom door, closing it gently behind me. Poppy knows what needs to be done for the most part. She isn't stupid. The house is too silent. Even as I pass the family portraits hanging on the walls, the silence grows. The

perfect family. I don't recognize them. A father, mother, and a perfect doting son. Fuck that and him, whoever he is.

I hit the high archway that leads into the lounge room when I stop my movement. The flames from the fire lick up the cobblestone fireplace, crackling among the embers, and there he stands, holding the marble ornament he bought her for their twentieth anniversary. He's tall, well over six-foot-five, and has a body fat index below fifteen. He's a beast. Trains in the gym every day and works the rest of the hours he isn't training. I don't know him much, to be fair. But from what I see, he isn't someone who you physically want to come toe-to-toe with.

He falls back onto the occasional chair that's tucked beside the fireplace, dropping the heavy marble ornament onto the carpet. The lounge room is adjacent to the dining room, but I can't see over the table. I don't have to, though, because I know. I know he has finally done it, and honestly, thank fuck, because I'm over it.

I clock the trigger on the gun and he jolts up, turning over his shoulder to look directly at me. His eyes are the same as mine in color, and I hate it.

I round the kitchen chair, gun still raised and on him as I shuffle further in. Seeing her lifeless body lying in a puddle of blood doesn't shock me as much as it would have others.

She never could get out. I didn't hate her for that, she did what she needed to do and what she thought would keep herself safe.

"Sit down, son. I think it's about time you have a drink." He tugs off his tie around his neck and tosses it onto the floor beside him. He was always away for business, buying new properties or meeting investors to buy more.

He's a fucking criminal. We all know it.

"I'm good." I lower myself onto the chair opposite his, keeping the gun aimed on him and resting my foot against the coffee table. Now with her gone, and the empty text message on my phone, this is going to be easy. "You're not going to shoot me, Wicked." He leans forward, resting his elbows on the top of his thighs. His brow curves upward in challenge, and I have to force myself to not pounce forward. To not lose my cool and let my rage out. I don't need to prove myself to him.

Not now.

And not ever.

"Actually," I say, turning the gun on its side. I can't show weakness. It will give Jared a chance to jump forward and take the gun, and even worse

than that—kill Poppy. “I would.” Years of rage and anger simmer below my surface because I know. I know how to release it. I just have to be patient. The downfall of a killer is the loss of patience, and I have plenty. Clearly.

“What are you going to do, Wicked? Shoot me? Then leave little Poppy out here for the system, hmm? No...” He leans back against the leather, resting his ankle on his knee. “You won’t do that because you don’t have the kind of *wickedness* you need inside of you to pull that trigger, so I’ll tell you what.” He pauses, reaching into the inside of his suit jacket and pulling out a packet of smokes. “I’ll save your punishment for Poppy.” The corner of his mouth curves around his white teeth and I snap. My finger squeezes the trigger, and I watch as if in slow motion as the center of his forehead explodes from the impact of the bullet. Blood splatters over the back wall, onto the hot coals in the fireplace, and sprays over my face. I knew what I had to do. To protect her. I will always do what I need to do to protect Poppy, and even though I failed this time, I’m not *ever* going to with Poppy.

A branch snaps from outside the window, and I slide down onto the carpet beside her, brushing her blonde hair away from her face. Strands are matted with dark red goo, sticking to her cheek. She still wears the red lipstick she wore every day, bruises on her cheek fading from last week. Overall, she didn’t deserve the shit she put up with. She was a good woman.

“I’m sorry.” Tears build in my throat but never roll. I stand back to my feet, running my hand through my hair. I’m seventeen and about to be thrown down a spiral life.

My eyes rest on him. I see nothing when I look back through him. I step over my mother, the blood-sodden carpet smushing as I get closer to Jared. The bullet hole weeps with blood and snotty brain matter. “Fuck you. I’m wicked enough.”

I don’t know how long I’ve been sitting here. It may have been hours. Days. Minutes. I watch as the flames in the open fire turn to burning hot coals. Until the air gets cold enough to snake up my spine.

There’s a knock on the door.

I ignore it. They’ll go away.

They knock again. “Police! Open up!”

Tossing the gun into the middle of the room, I push myself up from the sofa and take the steps to the front door. I squeeze the handle and open it to two officers and a man hanging back dressed in a suit. He wears a long

trench coat and has a cigar hanging out his mouth like he just walked off the set of some mafia movie.

I stare back at them. “They’re in the lounge.” Widening the door to allow them in, I slide down the wall near the hallway table, drawing my knees up to my chest. I don’t know what they’re doing in the other room, but I know I’m going to jail. I know that what I thought would happen, obviously hasn’t, and that everything has turned to shit.

The man in the suit kneels down beside me. “Son, there were reports of gunshots. I was in the area, so I thought I’d tag along. You want to tell me what happened here tonight?” Has Poppy come down and I haven’t known?

Shit. Poppy.

“He killed her, so I killed him. Simple.” I stare at the family portrait hanging on the wall. “I came down to see he had already killed her. He didn’t think I could do it.” I shrug. “So I did.”

The smell of Cuban smoke wraps around me, and I shuffle to the side to watch him. He doesn’t look familiar.

“You can take me to jail, but can you please make sure Poppy goes to a good home?”

His eyes come to mine and I follow the mustache that curls around the corners of his lips. “You’re not going to prison, son.” He stands to his feet. “Get up, get your sister, and pack some bags. You’re coming with me.”

“What?” I look up at him again but follow his command. Anything he wants, I do. There’s an air of authority that hangs over him, and I know I have to take him seriously.

“I don’t like to repeat myself, son. Go get your sister, and I’ll meet you both outside.”

Poppy doesn’t pack much even though I tell her to. I break the news to her and hold her as she cries all of her tears into my chest. It’s an hour later that I finally manage to drag her downstairs.

He’s already waiting outside a black SUV, that same cigar burning bright orange in the dark night.

“In the car.”

“How do I know you’re not going to hurt us?”

The man turns over his shoulder and the dimple on his cheek sinks in. “You don’t, but I’m all you’ve got.” He has a point. Opening the back door, I push Poppy in gently, shutting the door once we are inside. He pulls us

away from the curb and every now and then, our eyes meet in the rearview mirror.

“Where are you taking us?” I ask when I notice he drives us onto the highway, the one that heads out of town.

“To my house.”

“What? What about my parents?” I could have just directed Poppy into a bad situation. Why haven’t I called the cops? Wait... the cops *are* here.

“They’re gone, son. I’m not here to be your friend. I’m here to help you both because, well, shit, I don’t know why.”

“You do,” I say, studying the way the corner of his eyes crinkle as if reliving a memory. “You do know why you saved us.”

His hazel eyes meet mine. “Yes. I guess I do.”

After a few minutes, when I know he’s not going to elaborate further, I add, “So do you usually take in strays?” As soon as the words leave my mouth, he pulls us into a long cobblestone driveway. The entry is lit with two lanterns sitting on high posts, and at the end of the drive is a little tower where a man is parked inside, pushing the button to let his car through.

He pushes the button near his steering wheel, turning in his chair to face me. “Never. But let me lay down some rules to you both being here. One, stay away from my daughter.” *Tsk.* I don’t bother telling him that I’m not interested. He continues. “And two? I’m never your enemy.” He pushes open his driver’s side door and I shuffle out the back, tucking Poppy beneath my arm. I don’t know what the fuck is happening, but right now all I care about is keeping Poppy safe, and to keep Poppy safe, I need time to think. Worst-case scenario, I’d go to prison. I could live with that knowing that that piece of shit can’t touch her.

Stairs lead to twin doors, and little lantern lights leading the way give a warm entrance into what I’m guessing is probably an equally warm home. I can already hear laughter flowing from the kitchen. I don’t know what I expected when he said he was taking us to his home, but this isn’t it.

The front door opens, and a woman stands on the other side holding a spatula in one hand. Her blonde hair is up in a tight knot on the top of her head, where a white bandana ties to the front. She’s in loose jeans and a blouse slightly unbuttoned at the front, and fuck, but she’s beautiful. Her skin glows against the setting sun behind us, and when her wide hazel eyes meet mine, I feel it in my gut.

“Where’s your mother?” the cop asks, tucking her beneath his arm and kissing her on her head.

She looks between her—I’m guessing father—and me. “Um, she’s in the kitchen. Papa, what?” I realize I still don’t even know his name, but he looks down at me and smiles.

“Don’t you worry about that. How about you go show them the guest rooms so I can handle your mother, and then you can all come down for dinner.” The girl’s cheeks blush when she gives her dad the spatula, closing the door behind us.

“Sure.” She flashes him a wide grin as he disappears through the foyer. I squeeze Poppy tighter beneath my arm. We must look a fucking mess. Blood still clings to my clothes, and I know that if I look down at Pop, she’ll be wearing a blank expression.

“I’m Ruby...” The girl waves her hand in front of herself awkwardly. When I ignore her, she turns slightly. “Okay, anyway, follow me and I’ll show you where you’re both staying.” The house smells like caramel salted popcorn. Music floats through the space as we follow her up the wooden stairs. Family portraits hang on the walls, but nothing like where we just came from. Where the mother we were used to seeing had sadness in her eyes, Ruby’s sparkle with love as she looks up at—

“—What’s your dad’s name?” I ask as we hit the top.

She cusses under her breath as if she isn’t surprised her father left out an important detail. “Victor La Rosa.”

I continue to follow her down the long hallway, passing multiple doors that are closed. An opened one catches my eye and I pause, glancing inside briefly. Walls painted yellow with white cornices and posters hanging on the walls. More music pours out of her room—something unfamiliar. Never heard it.

Her little face fills the space instantly, the door shutting off my view to her room. I look down at her, watching as her pouty lips disappear when she curls them beneath her teeth.

Shit.

Why does she have to be so cute?

“How old are you?” I tilt my head to the side. It isn’t intentional, but when her cheeks flush and she ducks out of my space, I’m thinking she maybe thought it was. She’s shy.

Ruby La Rosa...

“Seventeen.” Same age as me. Worked. Don’t feel like a complete fucking creep perving on her. But she’s way too fucking shy for the girls I know around her age.

She widens the door beside her room and gestures inside. “It might be a tight fit for both of you on that bed, but it’s comfortable.”

My eyes narrow, and when hers swing back onto mine, I realize what she is implying.

“She’s my sister.”

“Oh.” Her brows hit her hairline. “Well, then she can sleep in here and you can have the room opposite.”

I shake my head. “I’ll take the floor in her room.”

“Okay.” Ruby runs her hands down her arms. She has a small body. I’d crush her if I touched her. “Well, I’ll get some clothes for her to wear and leave you both to—” She waves her hand up and down my body. “Wash up.” She quickly scatters off, leaving me thinking who the fuck Victor La Rosa is, and why the hell would he allow someone like me into his house where he keeps someone like her.

The room is larger than mine at our house and has its own bathroom. We aren’t this kind of rich, but we have money.

Shit.

I fall on top of the mattress as Poppy curls beneath the sheets in the bed without taking a shower. Blood and brain matter cling to me like a bad stench, but I can’t seem to care. What the fuck am I going to do? Pop and I don’t have any other family. It’s just us, but that doesn’t mean that people won’t be asking questions. We know other people. Fuck, even the parents know people.

There’s a knock on the door and I shuffle around to see Victor leaning against the frame.

“Victor, huh?”

He chuckles, widening the door. “I guess she filled you in.” There’s a pause, until he finally nudges his head to the hallway behind him. “We need to have a chat, son, and I’d rather that happen out here than in front of Poppy.”

Shuffling out of the sheets, I follow him down the stairs and out through the entry to the sitting room. Their house—or mansion—is the kind that slaps dollar bills in front of your face as soon as you see it. I’m pretty sure I

even saw guards at their entry gates. The furnishings and architecture hold an obvious opulence, but there is more to it than that. It feels like a home. The kind you watch on TV where the mother is always cooking or baking, and the child is a straight-A student. It upsets me in a way that I can't explain because not only is it unfamiliar, but it is—mundane. So why the fuck did this man invite me into his perfect family and life without so much as knowing who I am? In his eyes, I just killed my father. What would make him think I wouldn't do the same to him?

Victor spreads the sliding doors wide, opening onto a sparse area of flush greenery growing delicately through the cracks of the aged concrete and vibrant plants flowering among the shrubs. There's a small pool house that's up against the backyard, overlooking the pool and the patio of the main house with a built-in wooden patio and plants that hang off hooks, with lights switched on inside.

Victor stops walking, his hands on the railing of the frame that wraps around his patio. "You and Poppy can both stay in there starting tomorrow. Pearl, my wife, is setting it up for you both."

The sun has long since set, and I don't care much about the fact that I still haven't washed off the blood on my skin. The words I want to ask choke me. Why the fuck has this man just taken in two strangers? But two strangers where one just killed his father.

"Why did you bring me here? To your family?" I ask, stepping beside him until we're shoulder to shoulder. There's a large BBQ area with tables, chairs, and a standing bar. I could imagine countless nights of their friends coming over for a cookout. Laughing, drinking, doing all that shit that happy homes do when they aren't confined by the restraints of abuse. I could picture it, but I could never understand it.

"I was once in your shoes. Pearl knows it, and that is why she agreed to my having you both here." He turns to lean against the railing, his attention solely on me. "When I look at you, I see me. A scared boy with no one to turn to and a sister he needs to protect."

"You don't know me, though. I could be worse than what you're picturing right now."

He chuckles after a moment, and it's the first time that I've realized he has tattoos on his arms and hands. "Son, I come from a world where trust doesn't mean shit. Trust is a word that people who don't understand it throw around in hopes to win your approval." He crosses his ankles at his feet.

“You wanna know why I’m saving you?” The corner of his mouth curves upward. “The answer is simple. I think you can be trusted, because unlike the people I know, you have a moral compass. Loyalty. Compassion.” He reaches into the inside of his jacket, pulling out the packet of cigarettes that are tucked in his pocket. Banging the bottom onto his palm, he bites a trunk into his mouth and uses his other hand to light the end. Blowing out a cloud of smoke, he points to me with his fingers. “I was in your shoes when I was around your age.” As much as I try to seek the truth behind his words, I know that there’s no hidden agenda to them. There’s something trusting about the way he speaks. The confidence.

He takes another inhale of his smoke. “My only rule is don’t touch my kid unless I say you can.”

“Your *kid*?” I raise a brow at his choice of words. The girl is hardly a kid, but I’ll play.

The corner of his mouth curves. “And a favor... then I will make all this bullshit disappear.”

“What?” I ask, cocking my head to the side.

“Come to work with me next week. Last seventy-four hours. If you last that long, I will offer you and your sister a safe home here. Your charges? Gone. Your troubles?” His dark brows fly to his hairline, and it’s the first time I feel like I might be making a deal with the devil. “Definitely gone.”

I leave the space open for a few seconds before scoffing. “Sorry, but being a cop really isn’t in my vision—if you know what I mean.”

“Oh—” He pauses, and when his hand comes to my arm, his shirt lifting up from his wrist, I see a cross on the top. My eyes travel back up his arms to his face. “I’m no cop.”



Ruby

When I was eleven years old, I remember finding a kitten on the side of the road. She was hurt, bruised, and had patches of hair missing on her body, but I remember picking her up and carrying her to my house. I burst through the doors, crying because the poor kitty was obviously left discarded by her previous owners.

Mama was in the kitchen baking cookies and she stopped what she was doing, tossing her apron onto the counter, her hands coming to her hips. “Ruby! What is this?” My mom was the supportive kind. The kind of mother that all of my friends loved because she felt like theirs too.

“I found her on the sidewalk! She’s hurt. Can we keep her?” That was my first question.

Can we keep her?

My mom should have said no.

My father should have said no.

They both said yes.

We took her to the vet, fixed her up, and brought her home.

But that was a kitten, not two entire humans covered with blood—and not their own, might I add.

I sit in my room, staring at my bedroom door and wondering what I should do. Should I go and see them? The girl at least. I mean, she looked approachable. He didn't.

Sitting up, I pull the covers from my body and slip my feet into my fluffy Louis Vuitton slippers. Tiptoeing around the creak in the floorboard at the end of my bed, I squeeze the handle and slowly open the door. Theirs is slightly ajar, with a beam of light flickering from beneath. I take a slow step forward when I feel him. The air around me tightens and I hold my breath to stop myself from breathing too loud in his space.

"What are you doing?" His voice is like lava spilling over mountaintops, turning everything to ash on its way down. "Ruby, right?"

I spin around slowly, in hopes that I can think of something to say, when our eyes meet, only there's nothing that can help. He stands tall right beside me, his body lean and shoulders wide. His dark hair is shaved close on the sides, slightly thicker on the top, and his cheekbones are like perfectly shaved ice cubes, cut to perfection before leading to an equally shaved jawline. His eyes are weak, as if he had just smoked a few too many blunts. His soft lips curve up in a smirk.

Shit.

No.

"Ah, I was going to see if she wanted to come choose some clothes." Dumbest excuse ever, and why am I so afraid to talk to this guy? He's in my house. What's the worst he could do? "Sorry..."

"Don't apologize." His teeth flash, and I see a smidge of how white and straight they are. I bet when he smiles, it's beautiful, though I get the feeling he doesn't do it often. He moves forward, grabbing the handle of the door and clicking it closed. "Your dad bring strays in often?"

I shake my head slowly, tucking my blonde hair behind my ear. "No. Never."

He studies me closely, but I look away. The longer I maintain eye contact with him, the hotter my skin burns.

I step back until I collide with the wall.

"School?"

"Private."

The corner of his lip twitches. "Private as in you don't wanna tell me, or private as in the organization?"

I chew on the inside of my cheek. Why would I not want to tell him, he's basically staying in my house. "No, private school. Are you starting?"

He snickers, side-stepping me to open the bedroom door. "Nah, I'm going to work with your dad." My insides turn cold, and before I can say another word, his door is closed and I'm staring back at the intricate carvings sculpted into the wood. It isn't that I hate my dad's work. It's not technically work. It's just that it has always taken memories we could have had and replaced them with money. Power. Respect. To some, that may be nice. To Mama and me, it's a nightmare.

Making my way downstairs, I find Mama sitting in the living room with a book open on her lap. The open fire is crackling and lights dimmed just enough so she can read.

"Hey, baby, everything okay?" Mama's first language wasn't English, although she learned it during her school years in Cairo.

I smile at her, lowering myself down onto the chaise directly opposite. "Mama, we can still leave?"

Her eyes narrow on me and she closes her book silently while looking over her shoulder. She leans in closer, her bright blue eyes a contrast to her dark hair. "*Habibi*, I love him. I told you not to worry about it." My father met my mother while he was in Cairo for a *business* trip when she was fresh out of college. They fell in love, but as hard as he loved her, was as hard as he controlled her. He never hurt her, or me—ever. But last month I caught her packing her bags with tears strolling down her face.

I told her I would leave with her, but she swiped the tears away and shook her head, telling me I had misunderstood. I knew I hadn't. Papa may love us, but he has no problem entertaining other women. I'm guessing that's what it's about.

"Mama, we can go back to Cai—"

"There're my two queens." Papa enters the sitting room and I sit back a little straighter, smiling up at him while swallowing the rock that's formed in my throat.

Did he hear me?

"Papa, what is happening? Why are they here?"

"That's what I wanted to come down to talk with you both about." He replaces my mother on the chair and gently directs her down onto his lap. I used to admire their love, because it was one you could feel when you were around them, but after seeing the tears of Mama, the hero badge Papa once

wore on his expensive suits has now since rusted. Maybe it was gold-plated, not solid.

“Are they living with us now?” Papa was anything but conventional and he never played by the rules. You could never see what he was cooking until it had already been baked.

“Si, they are.”

I stare at him blankly, but he gives me the same look back. I’m no daddy’s princess. I’m Papa’s nightmare, and since I share that same fiery Sicilian blood that pulses through his veins, he damn well knows it. “And what is he going to do for the outfit?”

His eyes snap back to me. “*Cara*, you don’t get to question anything right now,” he mutters beneath his breath in Sicilian as my mother strokes his thigh affectionately.

He takes a small sip of his whiskey, his honey eyes resting back on mine. At times, I think it’s where I got my eyes from. When I’m in the sun, they’re green; in the dark, they’re honey-gold. The strangest thing. I probably would have got bullied for my eyes had people not known who my father was.

“They will be living with us and you will befriend them both, but *cara*, if you get too close to Wicked, I’ll act as I see fit.”

He leans back against the chair as my mother glides her finger down his jaw. I know she’s doing it to calm him down, but it still annoys me.

“Don’t forget your obligations to the Family.”

“May I be dismissed?”

He nods. “Night, princess.”

“So let me get this all the way straight...” Betty, my best friend since kindergarten, shuffles in closer as I unload my books into my locker. “Papi moved in two new kids, like, random ass kids, who have probably killed their parents or some weird shit like that, and told you to play nice but not too nice?”

I slam my locker closed and hold my books close to my chest. “Yes. I don’t know. But this is my dad we’re talking about.” Betty follows me down the long corridor and up the stairs to our first class.

“Right, I get that. Your Papi, the capo of the Sic—” I glare at her and her mouth slams shut. It’s not that I ever told Betty about my father, it was that she grew up around me so she came to learn it. With weird men

walking in and out of our home and all of our money and cars, fancy holiday homes, and private jet, she figured it out.

“Hey, Ruby!” A girl walks past, waving. I smile at her.

“Morning, Rubs!” Jake Bishop smirks at me, twirling a basketball on his finger.

I flash him a smile.

“I know,” I say to Betty. “So that’s what makes me nervous about the whole damn thing.” I follow her through the science lab, dropping my books onto the table toward the back of the class.

“Okay, so how about a distraction?” Betty folds her long leg over the other, brushing her straight blonde hair over one slender shoulder. “How about we go to a party tonight—since it is Friday—and you invite your orphan lamb?”

“I don’t know...” I ignore her insensitive comment about Poppy. “I don’t know if that’s her scene, and her brother seems really overprotective of her.”

“And?” Betty leans onto her empty desk, ignoring the fact that the rest of us already have our books and laptops out. “You’re, like, the most protected girl I’ve ever known and even *you* have a life.” Mr. Winsor rushes in like a wind of chaos. He’s always late to class. Betty whispers under her breath, “Just ask. Seriously.”

Parking my Tesla at the side entrance of the house, I stare up to where two soldiers stand with AKs strapped across their suit-covered chests. I don’t have a lot to do with them. Mainly because both of my parents drilled it into my head that they work for us. It came naturally after a while.

Pushing through the double wooden doors, I drop my bag near the side table, pausing when I notice Papa and Wicked chatting near the stairwell. He looks different to what he did last night, and I don’t just mean the fact that he’s no longer wearing bloody clothes.

“Principessa, how was school?” Papa pulls me beneath his arm and I sigh, resting my head against his chest as he places a gentle kiss on my head. Papa would always be my comfort, but just because I need him as my father does not mean my mother should tolerate his lifestyle as a husband. I can love them both equally without needing them to be together.

I peek up at Wicked from behind hooded eyes, finding his already on me. I would give almost anything to see him smile, just to see what it looks

like.

“Betty is coming over soon,” I say up to my father. “We’re going out tonight—”

“Take Oscar.” Papa releases me from beneath his arm, tucking his hands into his suit pockets.

“Well, I was hoping that since I’m seventeen now that I don’t need to take anyone...”

“Ruby, you are the daughter of the Cosa Nostra and the blood daughter of the Capo Dei Capi. There will never be a day that you do not have someone with you.” He takes out his cigar tube and removes the fat trunk of his favorite. “You should know that by now.”

“I do,” I whine, making my way near the stairs. The hairs on my arms prickle when I brush past Wicked. He’s wearing suit pants and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up—a completely different look to what he was wearing last night—and it looks... well, I’m not going to touch that right now.

When my eyes connect with his, I swear the corner of his mouth curves in a half-smirk. What the hell could he be so happy about?

“I mean it, Ruby. Don’t you go trying to run them off either. Oscar will be on your ass faster than any of those kids at that school drop to their knees in your presence.” I roll my eyes as I make my way down the hallway. Should I have asked Wicked if I could take Poppy out tonight, or would it be cool to just ask her directly?

I guess I’ll find out.

Bringing my knuckles to the wooden door to their room, I knock on the wood three times before it opens onto Poppy. She’s wearing some of the clothes I left outside their room last night, and by the looks of her damp hair, she’s had a shower, but her blue eyes are rimmed red and her cheeks are swollen.

“Hi.” I smile at her, not knowing which way this could go. “I’m Ruby.”

“I know.” She gestures into the room, widening the door farther so I can step inside. She closes it behind me. “Lenny told me.”

“Lenny?” I make my way to her bed. “I thought his name was Wicked.”

“Oh, it is.” She moves through the room, slowly lowering herself down onto her bed. “But I’ve always called him Lenny because I didn’t think anyone should have a name like Wicked.” Weird. Why would your sister

not call you by your real name? “This must be really weird for you, having strangers living in your home.”

Pulling out the chair that’s tucked beneath the computer desk, I wheel it closer to her bed and lower myself down. “It’s fine. I don’t mind. We actually have a lot of people coming in and out.” I lean back. “Me and Papa don’t see eye-to-eye often, but if anything, I trust his judgment.”

“Must be nice.” She blinks up at me, and it’s the first time I’ve seen her close up. She might be younger than I thought... maybe it’s not a good idea. “Aren’t you going to ask why we’re here?”

I shake my head. “Nope. I don’t ask questions. How old are you?” At least not the important kind.

She pauses for a few seconds before her fingers twist on her lap. “Why?” She isn’t stupid. Whatever her and Wicked’s story is, I’m sure it’s a sad one.

“I’m going to a party tonight and was going to see if you wanted to join, but I totally get—”

“—please. Yes.” She rubs her nose with the back of her hand. “Sorry, I don’t mean to sound too thirsty, but yes, I would love to. Honestly, just to get out.”

I reach for her hand and pull her to her feet. “Then let’s go and get ready. I’ll introduce you to my best friend who is coming over too. Oh, and I have to have a soldier on my ass constantly, but you’ll get used to it.” Opening her door, we slide to the one opposite theirs, pushing mine open and enter my room.

“Wow,” she whispers as soon as we’re in my bedroom. She looks over the corkboard wall filled with thousands of photos, tickets to concerts, flight tickets, and any other thing I’ve wanted to keep over the years. Memories are a reminder that you’ve lived a life. I don’t want to ever lose that feeling. “Your room is...”

“Messy?” I toss my jacket onto the chair beside my desk.

“I would say lived-in.”

I smile over at her, kicking off my shoes and letting my hair down from the messy bun it has been in all day. “Thanks. That’s the best compliment you could give me.”

She turns and pauses when she sees my uniform. “Ah... is that the uniform?”

I look down at the blouse and checkered mini skirt. “Yeah, I know. Cliché, but unfortunately, Papa only owns forty percent of the stock at school, and it’s not enough to overturn the uniforms.”

“Is that what he does?” she asks, slowly making her way around my bedroom and pausing every few seconds to study an area on the corkboard.

I chuckle. “No, not exactly. I mean, it’s one of his hobbies. He has multiple hobbies, but his main job is, well, more complicated than that.” Pulling out my phone, I swipe through Instagram and see posts from Harvey’s house. He throws parties every single time his parents are out of town, and since his mom travels a lot for her book tours, we’re there often.

“He has Lenny doing something. Should I be worried?” When she looks directly at me with her wide, doe eyes, I want to say no. I want to say that whatever he is doing, you won’t lose him. But I don’t want to lie to her.

“Knock, knock, bitches!” Betty shoves my door open, carrying a box filled with what I’m guessing is alcohol. “The party is here.” Poppy blinks up at the door, and just when I think she’s going to get scared and crawl into a hole, away from my extremely extroverted bestie, her face beams with a smile and she stands to her feet.

“I’m Poppy.”

Betty pauses, slowly lowering the carton of alcohol onto the desk while side-eyeing Poppy. “You are cute... damaged, but cute.”

Poppy seems unfazed by Betty’s judgment. “The damage is here to stay.” I’m hoping one of these days she will open up and tell me what happened, but I’m not counting on it.

Betty tosses a bottle at her. “Drink, and then we leave.” I take one out of her hands.

“We’ve got Oscar on our ass.”

Betty whines, flopping down onto the chair and crossing her legs. “Papa doesn’t want to let up?”

“Nope.” I scoop up what I’m wearing tonight. A simple tight black dress that hugs my pinched waist and splayed-out hips. The thin spaghetti straps over ample cleavage spill out the top, and the bottom comes just over my knee. Not too short, but tight and revealing where it counts. It’s also easy to cover up with a big jacket to get out of the house. After scrubbing up in the shower while sipping on my mixer, I squeeze the dress on and head back out to my room, smiling when I see Betty making more effort

with Poppy. Poppy hides her pain in a way that is obvious. If Papa raised her, she'd be better at it.

"You wearing the boots?" Betty calls out from my bedroom as I shuffle through my walk-in closet.

I skip past all the designer shit and pull out my vintage boots I scored on Etsy. They're black leather military style but have a thick platform on the soles. They tie up to mid-calf, and bonus points because they're worn into comfort.

I walk out, brushing my hair to the side when both Poppy and Betty stare back at me.

Poppy's smile is wide enough to show that she and her brother either both got braces or they're truly just graced with great genetics. "You have to be the most beautiful girl I've ever seen."

"Now, I would take offense to that—" Betty pushes up from the bed and hooks her arm around the back of my neck. "But everyone knows this girl is deadly. I'm saying it's her—" She waves her arms around. "Perfect concoction of ethnicities."

I shove her away gently, emptying the rest of my drink down my throat. "I'll drive."

Betty rolls her eyes for the second time in thirty minutes. "What happened to drinking tonight?"

"I can!" I snatch my keys off the counter. "Oscar can drive it back."

Poppy hangs back a little, and it's not until we're outside waiting for one of the soldiers to drive my car around from the underground garage that I turn to face her. "We don't have to go tonight. We can stay back and watch movies? Honestly, I'm over high school parties."

Our home is right in the city of Chicago on North Burling Street. With twenty-five thousand square feet and high concrete walls and black wired gates, my father keeps a lot of his business underground while remaining the perfect infrastructure on the outside. The dirtiest men I know are the ones who appear clean.

She shakes her head gently, running her hands down the shirt she's paired with skinny jeans. "No, I want to."

"Okay, well, if you ever want to leave—" I hear my DB 11 purr as it stops in front of us. "We can leave. Any time." I don't know Poppy's story, so it's hard to gauge whether I'm doing the right thing. She has to be around

our age, with her brother a little older, so I'm guessing she's old enough to make those decisions on her own.

Betty pulls the door open and leans the chair forward. "Slide in, pretty girl."

Poppy slips to the back and I look over my shoulder until my eyes collide with a black Rolls Royce that's coming up the drive. It's not Papa's Rolls that's a distraction, though. It's the car behind his.

My smile falls and I quickly slide into the driver's seat, slamming the door closed and driving us down the long driveway.

"You okay? Was that Mikhail?"

My heart stammers in my chest as I suck in deep breaths. "Yes."

Betty's hand rests on mine without a word spoken. It's why Betty and I have always worked. She knows when to speak and when to not. Friendships can be tricky because so many people don't know how to respect those boundaries, so I'm lucky I have Betty who does.

Tapping the accelerator down faster as we move onto the main road off our gated home, I bring my eyes to the rearview mirror. "So, Poppy, whereabouts are you from?"

Poppy's eyes glass over as her mouth curves in a way that isn't enough to call a smile. "Detroit."

"And Papa brought you guys here? What the hell was he doing in Detroit?" The end was more to myself, but Poppy answers anyway.

"He showed up after my parents were—dead."

Betty's hand squeezes mine and I almost forgot she was still holding it.

"Oh," I murmur, driving us farther out of the city and toward the party. Death isn't something that surprises me and Betty knows that. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

"Don't be..." she whispers. "I mean, my mom was great, but my father...." She shakes her head and my throat swells. A wave of protectiveness washes over me, and now all I want to do is turn the car around and drive us home. "Anyway, I don't want to kill our night. I really do just want to forget."

"Then I can help with that."

"We both can..." Betty adds gently.



Ruby

Howard Jake's house is a farmhouse mansion that sprawls out over acres of land. The barn-style rooftops and glass walls showcase the expertise of the architecture. It's the subject I want to study if I'm ever fortunate enough to actually go to college, but we all know that just isn't in my cards.

Music plays loudly and bodies of drunk teens spread out over the wraparound porch at the front. Everyone stops to stare at my car rolling down the driveway. It's not that no one at my school has money, they all do, but I think over time people become fascinated with who I am because I keep to myself. Betty calls it obsession, but I prefer fascination. The same way humans are with animals. That's what it feels like sometimes, as if I were performing tricks in front of a crowd at a circus.

I cut the car and unzip my long coat, leaving it in the back seat and sweeping up my phone. "Selfie before we enter..."

Poppy leans forward from the back and Betty licks the side of my cheek as I beam a bright smile into the lens. My sharp jaw is prominent, so much so Betty says it reminds her of Angelina Jolie, and my eyebrows are thick and perfectly plucked. My skin constantly has a natural glow to it and my eyes tonight look more green than hazel, thanks to the darker dress. My

teeth are white and straight, and I have one simple dimple on the side of my cheek that looks unnatural. My hair remains with a natural wave, and my body is tight and curvy, thanks to my gym schedule.

From what everyone can see... it's perfection.

I do wonder what they would think of me if they saw the parts that aren't.

Pushing open the door, I let Poppy out and toss the keys at Oscar who leans against his car that's parked behind mine.

"You have a bodyguard?" Poppy laughs nervously. "What kind of cop is your dad?"

"Oh, he's no cop." Betty chuckles, and I know she won't say any more than that, but I want to. Poppy shared something with me, so now I want to share something with her.

I take a deep breath. "Papa is the Boss of the Sicilian mafia, Chicago outfit." I watch for any flinch as her face grows more visible the closer we get to the house.

She blinks slowly. "Okay. I should have guessed that."

"I don't know what he saw in Wicked or why he was there though." I smile at her weakly. "I'm sorry I can't give you more than that." And I am, regardless of whether I want to or not.

We pass by people on the patio and I wave and say hello to the ones who greet me. It's all of them. I make a beeline through the groups of people and pass the lounge where people are making out, mostly half naked or all the way naked with cocaine sprawled out over ass cheeks and someone taking a hit from a bong out of a girl's vagina. I let out a deep breath as I put space between us all and we finally get outside.

"Holy cow!" Poppy screeches, still looking back at what's happening in the lounge. "That is *what*?"

The music changes to Side Kick, the atmosphere instantly less chaotic. Betty bounces her way toward Jason Bear and I take Poppy's hand in mine as I lead her toward the group of people all seated around a small inbuilt fire pit. It's not exactly cold, but you give these boys any reason and they're lighting one.

"Baby giiirrrllll!" Howard hollers out, his arms stretched wide.

He's the captain of our basketball team and you can tell. His shirt is off and tied around his forehead, and his jean shorts are pulled down slightly to show the top of his boxers.

“I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.” I place Poppy down on a chair before tapping his fist with mine.

“I almost didn’t. This is my friend Poppy.” I gesture with my thumb to where she sits.

They all nudge their heads at her. It’s half of the basketball team and football team out here with their girlfriends or their girls for the night. I know I promised Betty I would let loose and have a good night tonight, but now that Poppy is here, I don’t want to get too stupid. I need to somehow sneak past the fact that Betty is always the one feeding us drinks throughout the night.

“So.” Betty takes a seat on the chair beside Poppy. “How much do you think your brother is going to hate her after he finds out that she brought you here?”

“My brother doesn’t hate people,” Poppy says, and I ignore Betty’s attempt at stirring the pot. “He simply doesn’t care.”

I watch as people dance around the place, drinking and snorting. It becomes painfully obvious how much Poppy has had to drink, so around the three-hour mark, I take her by the hand and pull her to her feet. “I’m going.”

Betty flicks the rolled up hundred-dollar bill at me, wriggling her ass on her take-home for the night. “Oh, come on, Rubs. Have fun!”

“I’m taking her home. You coming or not?”

Betty shakes her head slowly, and even though I already knew she was staying behind, I wanted to triple-check.

“Betty...” I know no one will hurt her here, mainly because they all know she is practically my sister and well... everyone knows who my dad is. “Are. You. Sure?”

Peter, the guy she is currently sitting on, waves me off. “Come on, Rubs. You know I’ve got her.”

I smile down at him sweetly. *You better.*

Tucking Poppy beneath my arm, I start directing her out of the house and through the same way we came. Finding Oscar near my car, I rub my finger and thumb together to gesture my keys and he tosses them at me just as a loud Harley guns it down the street, slowing to a stop behind Oscar’s car. When his long body rolls off the bike, I unlock my car and push the button to open the doors.

“Hey...”

Wicked looks straight past me and brings his hands to his sister's face, forcing her up to look at him. "How much has she had to drink?"

"A bit..." I admit, tossing my keys into the car.

"And you?" When he turns around to face me, I feel my heart speed up in my chest.

"Um, none since being here. Once I realized how much she had, I stopped."

He drags his eyes away from me and carefully puts her into the back seat of the car, pushing the button for my door.

Oscar looks between Wicked and me before backing up slowly and slipping back into his car. Now it's just he and I, and—I expect his anger.

"First, she's fourteen, so I don't know what kind of shit she has told you."

My mouth falls open as I'm sure shock sprawls over my face.

"Second"—he slams my door closed so she can't hear—"why the fuck didn't you run this past me before taking her?" His chest is a whisper from mine and the goose bumps that prickle on my arms have nothing to do with the temperature of the air.

"I'm sorry... I didn't know she was young. I thought she was my age." I fold my arms in front of me and his eyes fall down to the movement before following down past my thighs and back up to my face. I feel his eyes move over my exposed flesh like hot laser beams.

His head tilts to the side and the moonlight bounces off his sharp jaw. "Did she tell you anything?"

I run my tongue over my bottom lip, tucking my hair behind my ear. Doing all of the things I do when I'm trying to distract myself or—well, it has never happened yet—find someone attractive. Which I do. I think Wicked is the hottest guy I've ever seen. "A little bit."

"And have you told her anything?"

My eyes come to his, and the way he looks at me is as though he can see right through my soul. "A little bit..."

"Yo!"

I quickly spin around and fall back slightly against Wicked's chest. He doesn't shift his weight. "What's up?" I yell out to Jackson Paul as he trots his way down to my car.

He flings his shirt over his shoulder, his eyes drifting over mine and landing on Wicked. His smile disappears. "You good?"

“I’m fine, Jackson...” Jackson has had a crush on me all his life, but he’s respectful in a way that he’s allowed us to maintain a friendship.

“Who’s this?” He flicks his finger toward Wicked. “He coming in, or is he the reason little Miss Ruby La Rosa is leaving the party early...” Jackson hooks his arm around my neck to pull me into his chest, only Wicked catches my dress and yanks me back carefully.

I remove Jackson’s arm. “He’s a friend of my father’s, Jackson...”

His face instantly falls. His eyes widen before he flashes Wicked a wide smile. “Oh, hey, man. You wanna come in?”

Wicked grabs me by the hand and turns me back to face him. Everywhere he touches burns like a memory I’ve tried to forget.

I tilt my head up to look at him, only my eyes fall to his lips. The corner twitches.

“We’ll finish this at *home*. ”

Then he backs away, stopping at Oscar’s door and leaning down to look at me over his shoulder slightly before going back to his bike. He fires up the Harley, and as the deep engine growls through the night, a sinking feeling drops to the base of my gut.

Why does he remind me of Papa already, and how is he already so comfortable bossing me around?

“You sure you’re okay?” Jackson asks, opening my door as I slide in.

“Yes. Just take care of Betty tonight.”

He shuts my door and leans in when I lower my window. “She good?” He gestures to the back seat and I look over my shoulder to see Poppy lying on her back.

“I’ve just got to get her home.”

“Alright, Skippy. I’ll see you later.”

I start my car and pull away, looking in my rearview mirror to see Oscar’s headlights beam as he follows. That space is replaced with Poppy’s head.

“Hmmmm. Interesting...” she murmurs, catching my eyes in the rearview mirror.

I go back to the road, squeezing the steering wheel with my hand to try to erase the feeling of Wicked on me. “What is?”

“My brother is going to change, isn’t he? This is just the beginning.”

I don’t know how to answer that. I don’t want to lie to her, but I don’t want to scare her.

“Let’s hope not.”

He is.

“He likes you, I think...” Poppy adds, and now I wish I had Betty in here to burn the conversation.

“Why do you say that?” I take the roads that lead to the city.

“He touched you.” She looks out the side window and I turn the music on to drown out both of our voices. She’s drunk and I don’t want her to say anything to me that she might regret in the morning.

The high black wired gates part when it senses my car coming and I pull in to the side of the house, right behind Wicked’s bike.

I turn off my car and open the door, letting Poppy out of the back. “I’m so hungry.”

“Well, we will go make you something to eat.”

She lets me pick her up out of the car and lead her to the front door. The house is quiet. Even when my parents are home, it’s like this. Dead inside. I was basically raised by the soldiers more than my parents. I was never upset about it, but now I guess I’d have to get used to having Wicked and Poppy here too.

Pushing open the front door, I lead her through the white and black marble foyer where the grand staircase leads to upstairs, and through to the kitchen. My mom designed this home and it was built before I was born, but along the way, they managed to keep things updated. It was the first thing she got to do as her hobby when she and Papa got together.

I pull out a barstool and place her down before flicking on the heating throughout the house.

“Okay,” I say, coming back in. “What do you feel like? We can order Uber Eats, or I can cook you something, but I have to admit, I’m not good at it.”

Poppy leans her face on the palm of her hand, staring at me from weak eyelids. At this rate, she won’t even last long enough to wait for either.

“Uber it is.” I pull my phone out and open up the app, clicking through the orders. I choose Shake Shack because, honestly, is there anywhere better, before placing my phone back onto the counter.

“You made it...” his voice drifts through the archway that leads to the dining room, and my shoulders stand back a little as I look up at him. He’s wearing loose gray sweats and nothing else. I force myself to not gawk at his body before nodding.

“Yep. I just ordered takeout.” I push off the counter and make my way to the fridge, pulling out a bottle of water. When I close it, I realize how close I am to him.

He steps closer, the distance between us painfully tight. Closing my eyes, I slowly blow out my breath between my lips while raising the bottle to my mouth. When my eyes open again, he’s standing in front of me.

“You wanna know anything about us, you ask me—not her.” I turn my head to the side to check on Poppy when I see her lying on her arm, her mouth slightly open and her eyes shut. She fell asleep. I’m not surprised.

Warm fingers are around my chin, forcing my face back to his. “You hear me?”

My veins fill with lava when our eyes connect once again. “Can you tell me?” It comes out as a whisper, but he’s so close I know that I don’t have to repeat myself.

“Mmm,” he lets out a little grunt that has a direct line to every single thing that feels good inside of me. “Yeah, I just might.”

His lips look soft, like a perfect bow that dips at the top before slightly swelling out. The sharp edges of his jaw tease me and I have to force my hands down to not run my finger over them. “Why do I feel like I’ve known you both all of my life?”

Wicked shakes his head slightly, stepping even further into my space. His bare chest brushes my cleavage and my heart slams against my ribcage.

“Maybe because we have.”

As soon as he releases my chin, the trance that we were both locked in explodes around us and I’m back in the now. An ache forms deep in my belly and I rest my hand around my chin as if to replace his. It’s not quite the same.

Pulling Poppy up with one hand, he moves across to the archway. “Night, Ruby.” I wait until they’ve both disappeared up the stairs before I can finally breathe again. Pulling out a barstool, I sink down and run my fingers through my hair.

When I was old enough to understand what my father did and who my family was, I swore to myself that I wouldn’t willingly get with anyone in the mafia. I saw what it did to my mother, my aunts, and knew I never wanted that life, but I also knew what it felt like. I have been living with it all of my life, and if I could get out, I would. But even with that, I have been around attractive people all of my life, and I don’t just mean

appearance. I swore I wouldn't dabble within the business, or even at school. I pictured myself getting into Harvard and graduating with a bachelor's in art and architecture. I wanted to open my own studio and paint and draw and listen to music all day while designing homes. I wanted to marry an accountant and enjoy the white picket fence lifestyle with the basic husband.

I wanted us to be happy.

Obviously, it was all a dream so far out of reach that I knew it wasn't attainable in this lifetime.

Men have never fazed me.

Until now.

After waiting for the Uber, I grab the bag of grease from Oscar and someone I don't recognize near the front door.

"Ruby, this is Val." Oscar gestures to the man standing beside him. He's not much older than me. This isn't an uncommon thing. Papa generally has the younger guys on tap. He says they're more disposable. Cold-hearted prick.

"Hi..." I open the bag. "You guys hungry?"

"We're good." Val smiles at me with his eyes.

"Mmhmm. You and I are going to be great friends, Val." Making my way through the lounge, I shuffle the bag of food onto one arm and reach between my boobs for my phone. Eleven-thirty. "Man. I'm getting old." Leaving the bag on the coffee table, I reach for a bottle of Don Julio before scooping it back up and tiptoeing down the long hallway, passing Papa's office. I step backward, pressing the door slightly, but it doesn't open. No surprise. Papa and his secrets. I continue down until the end, looking between the door to the cinema or the door to the garage.

I press the door to the garage open. Noticing the dim light above is already on, I kick the door closed behind me and pause when I look up to see Wicked leaning on his bike.

Sighing, I take the steps down and fall onto the bottom one, popping open the bottle of tequila.

"Really? That party wasn't enough for you?"

"First of all..." I say, raising my finger while wrapping my lips around the tip. "I didn't get to drink because of Poppy. And second?" I lean back on my elbow, taking another swig. "I'd rather drink at home." When he

starts moving toward me, my legs slam closed. Which is ridiculous because it's not like they were open anyway.

He passes the Lamborghini, my Aston, and the Rolls, before stopping directly in front of me. My eyes travel up from his boots, past his bare chest and strong abs, and up past the veins on his neck before resting on his eyes.

He swipes the bottom of his thumb against the curve of his lip. “There a reason why you’re in the garage?”

I slowly lift the bottle to my lips, flashing my lashes up at him from below. “No. You?”

“Jesus fuck.” He leans down, snatching the bottle out of my hand. I think he’s about to toss a just-opened bottle of Don to the side when he stares down at me while tipping his head back slightly to take a drink.

I shuffle to the side for him and he falls down beside me, but a step up. “Do you know why Papa wants you yet?”

He shuffles his legs, and one comes painfully close to mine. I hold my breath before turning slightly to grab the bottle from him. Our eyes collide and everything around me fades to the back of my mind. “No, I don’t.” His tongue slides over his bottom lip. “Do you?”

Shaking my head, I whisper, “No.”

“The guy from tonight. He your boyfriend?”

I chuckle, finally snatching the bottle back and bringing it to my lips. Sounds stupid, but sharing a bottle with him makes my brain short-circuit. I wonder what he feels like. *Tastes like*. Jesus Christ, Ruby... the tequila is working. Before I realize I’ve left too big of a gap between questions, I quickly say, “No. God no. Why?” I turn around. This time my knee collides with his thigh and both of our eyes fly to the connection.

I wince before he wraps his fingers around my chin, forcing my face up to his. “Daddy told me not to touch you, and lucky for him, I do think I owe him some kind of loyalty since I whacked off my old man and he did save Poppy, but hear me out—” He presses his thumb against my lower lip, forcing my mouth slightly open. His mouth kicks up in a smirk. “You ever look at me the way you are right now? And I’ll fuck you on his office desk and leave my marks all over your body. I don’t give a fuck.” My eyes stay on his mouth. I want to lean forward and kiss him, but I know he’ll pull back. “Nod if you agree.”

My head moves up and down, and he releases my lip, leaning back on his elbow like he didn’t just ignite a wick that has never been lit.

I squeeze my eyes closed and take another drink. Then another. “Papa really told you to stay away from me?”

His arm wraps around my body, his long fingers tightening around the glass bottle. “Yup.”

“Huh. He’s never had to do that before.”

Reaching for the paper bag, I take out the french fries and give him the rest. I suck the salt off my thumb, my eyes moving between his lips and eyes. “Well, if you’re not going to kiss me, then you can tell me your story.”

His dark brows pull in. “What?” The muscles on the side of his jaw tense.

A chuckle escapes me as I reach into the fry bucket. “Never mind. I think I’m drunk.” When he doesn’t answer me, I look up at him, trying to hide my smile.

“Are you blackmailing me to kiss you?”

“What?” My face scrunches. “Excuse me, but I don’t need to blackmail a man if I want to be kissed.” I toss a fry at his annoying face and can’t help but laugh when it hits the tip of his pierced nose.

“Oh yeah?” he teases. “Pretty sure you are.”

I roll my tongue over my teeth, pushing up from the ground. “Okay then. Let’s test that theory.”

“What are you doing?” He turns his head over his shoulder slightly, and his dimple sinks into his cheek when he laughs. “Sit your ass down.”

I reach for the door handle, opening it wide. “Oh, Val!” I call out in my most fairy-tale princess voice.

The door slams closed and I’m staring at an arm rippling of muscle and veins. I smirk, slowly turning back to face Wicked when his hand is on my throat, shoving me up against the door. My organs melt to the tips of my toes when his chest pushes against mine. “Do that shit again and see what happens.”

I aimlessly reach for the door handle, my eyes going between his lips and eyes. I smirk up at him when his jaw twitches.

“Ruby!” Betty’s voice echoes out behind the door. “Bitch, where you at!”

Fucking Betty.

Wicked’s mouth turns into a half-smile as his face dips lower and he licks the corner of my lip. “Tsk, tsk... saved by the annoying bestie.” My thighs clench together and my teeth sink into my lip to stop from moaning

as I twist the door handle, yanking it open onto Betty, who is standing at the end of the hallway, her mouth wide open when she sees us.

“Ah, I see what’s going on here—” Her finger flies between Wicked and me, but I see the exact moment she notices just how ridiculously hot Wicked is. She stops walking, her head tilting to the side and her eyes going up and down his body before resting on his face. “You’re too hot to be anything but a red flag.”

“Hey! I thought you were sitting on—” His hand touches the back of my thigh and goose bumps break out over my skin. Ice slides over the base of my spine. I lean against the door. “I thought you were getting...”

She waves me off. “I know.” Reaching for my bottle of tequila, she eyes both of us before swiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Has our little Ruby Rose finally met someone who perks her attention enough?”

“Okay!” I step forward and out of Wicked’s embrace, instantly feeling the emptiness of not having him near. Hooking my arm into Betty’s, I look over my shoulder slightly, just in time for Wicked to blow a kiss.

Not the kind I wanted, asshole.



Wicked

Death burns the back of my mind, but as time goes on, I notice the flames simmer. I know I have a job to do, and I would do it well. We have been in the La Rosa home for three days and I have already rubbed my shit all over his daughter. I don't know if she's worth losing my dick over just yet. I don't know how the mafia works, but I've figured out Victor is old school. He shifts between being a caring father and husband, to drug meetings and whatever else he's doing.

Again, still not really fucking sure how I ended up here.

"My head hurts..." Poppy rolls onto her side, and I turn to face her up on the bed. I told Victor I didn't want to move into the pool house. Didn't make a lot of sense since I didn't want to be here long.

"Good. Then maybe you've learned your lesson."

I jump up off the mattress on the floor, gesturing to the end of the bed. "You're going to school with Ruby on Monday. Think you can handle that and not be a fucking idiot?"

"Lenny!" Poppy scolds, shoving her blankets off her body and swinging her legs over the edge. "Yes, I can. And speaking of..." She swipes a towel on the computer table, glaring at me in passing. "You think you and Ruby

can simmer down the attraction? Anytime anyone is in the same room as you both it's awkward, and I've never seen you with a girl before!" I hear the shower turn on, but the door is slightly ajar, which only means one thing. Poppy wants to try to talk about girl shit.

I grab a hoodie and slide it over my head, quickly dashing out of the bedroom before she can start but end up crashing into someone.

My hands fly out to catch Ruby before she collides with the hallway. "You good?"

"Shit..." She pulls the earbuds out of her ears, and I have to force my hands off her body to stop from shoving her up against the wall and doing all the bad shit I've pictured doing to her since I first saw her. The animal inside of me wants to break her apart to see what she's made of. It's that wild rush that courses through my veins knowing that I'm not supposed to touch her, much less ruin her. Her phone starts ringing in her hand and the photo that pops up on her screen is a selfie of her and the fuckboy who was hanging off her arm at the party last night. He's looking at her, but she's smiling at the camera.

Fuck. After last night, I know where she stands with him, but as long as she's not on my dick, it's going to be a problem. One I don't want. She doesn't look like the type of girl who would have some big mafia boss as her dad. She looks like a bitchy cheerleader, and I thought she was, but as time goes on, I'm second-guessing myself. The kindness that lingers within her words and the gentleness in how she handles Poppy. I know she probably doesn't have a mean bone in her body, and if she does, I wanna see it come to life while I'm fucking hers out of her.

She hits ignore. "You should use the other room." Turning, she points to the door that's closed. "It has everything in there for you."

"Yeah, I will, when Pop is settled." Her skin is tanned, the kind that glows any time of the day, but right now, her cheeks have a soft peach color to them. She has the eyes of a siren, with dark lashes that fan out thickly, and lips that most girls drop thousands to obtain.

"She okay?" Ruby asks, and I force myself to not drag my hungry eyes over her body. Tight black sports bra and tiny little gym shorts. Fuck, I'm not going to last.

"Hungover, but she'll be fine."

Her phone starts ringing again, and before I can stop myself, I snatch the fucking thing out of the palm of her hand, tossing it into the empty room

behind her.

“Wicked!” She turns to snap at me, but I back her up against the wall with my hand covering her mouth. I lean down to the side of her neck, just enough so that the top of my nose glides over the flesh of her throat. Bumps rise to the surface when I inhale.

Her chest rises and falls as she takes deep breaths. “What are you doing?” The softness of her whisper raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

I had every intention of sticking to my word. Of staying away from her. But any time she’s around, my dick is hard and my patience is thin. “Whatever the fuck I want.” I bring my knee between her legs, pressing it against her.

Her shoulders pull back, her fingers trailing to the back of my neck, pulling me down to her face. She brushes her lips over mine. “Then fucking kiss me.”

I smirk against her lips, placing a gentle kiss on hers before wrapping my fingers around the hair that’s fallen down the nape of her neck. Her tongue slips into my mouth and I have to fight with myself to go slow. Easy. Fucking other girls has always been just that—fucking. They were all experienced and well aware of what they were getting themselves into with me, but Ruby is different. I already feel it the way she releases soft little moans into my mouth.

I grab her from the backs of her thighs, lifting her up the wall while never releasing her mouth. Her lips move with mine, taking every bit that I give her. Finally, I pull myself away from her, resting one hand against the wall beside her head while leaving the other beneath her ass to hold her up.

She tightens her legs around my waist, her little mouth slightly parted as she takes in panted breaths. “I—shit.”

I smirk down at her, rubbing the edge of my thumb over the curve of her ass. “Cold feet, princess?” I bend down to catch her earlobe between my teeth. “Bit off more than you can chew?”

Her little body twists in my grip, and I slowly lower her to the floor, thinking she knows she’s made a mistake. Instead, she raises her sports bra over her head, dropping it to the floor while tiptoeing into the room she just said was mine.

“You coming in?” Turning, she shows me her perfect tits shake as she moves. Her cheeks spread a cute shade of pink as she backs up until the backs of her thighs collide with the end of the bed.

I have two options here. I could ignore the little mafia princess and not wake up every morning fearing that her psycho daddy has figured out what I've done to his precious little *principessa*, or I could stop complaining like a bitch—I kick the door closed, grinning at her.

“Take off your pants. And make it look fucking cute.”

She sucks her finger into her mouth before dipping it between her thighs, spreading her panties to the side and sinking her finger inside her. “Like this?”

“Sluttier.” My knees hit the end of the bed and I wrap my fingers around her chin, forcing her face up to mine. Her eyes lower to my zipper, her little hand coming to the swell, rubbing it in circles. Heat rushes to my balls when she slowly pulls the zipper down and yanks the rest down until I’m standing in only my briefs.

I massage her head. “Why’d I think you were a virgin?”

She bats her lashes up at me, running a single finger down the base of my cotton-covered cock. “I still might be.” Sliding the band of my boxers over the tip of my cock, she licks her lower lip. Excitement touches her cheeks and I have to calm myself down. She’s way too innocent for this shit, she’s just playing games—or maybe she isn’t and that little act she has on for everyone is just for her papa.

Before I can think of anything else—thank God because I didn’t like where those thoughts were going—her swollen lips wrap around my cock and warmth fills me like a shock of adrenaline, pulsing right down to the base of my balls. My hand is in her hair, tugging the strands and directing her over my length. Not. A. Virgin.

There’s just no way.

Her tongue flicks over the base of my cock, and when she sucks up, she bats her lashes up at me. It’s a sight I’ll never forget. Her messy blonde hair, slick skin from her run, and smudged mascara. Ruby is already beautiful, but right now she looks like sex.

I pull her off me with a fist of her hair, dragging her to her feet. Her little body touches my skin and I suck in a breath, dragging my finger over the side of her head. “Gonna ruin you.”

She leans down, her tongue curling around my nipple. “Gonna let you.”

Grabbing her from the backs of her thighs, I throw her onto the already made bed. She yelps loudly before chuckling, and I hover over her body, a hand on her mouth.

Raising my brows, I bite her lip. “Shut up. Your other daddy might hear.”

Her eyes turn to slits, and I laugh against the curve of her neck, licking across her collarbone. She doesn’t seem like the cheesy type, but I have to make sure before I dive balls deep.

I part my fingers. “Can you be quiet?”

She nods.

“Good girl.” I lower my lips onto hers and rub my dick over her wet pussy. Her chest rises and falls as her breathing deepens.

I suck on her lower lip, bringing my other hand to the side of her neck and tensing, before massaging the back of her head, deepening the kiss. I direct my cock toward her entrance and pause, looking down at her.

“Just so you know, whoever you’ve been fucking, I want the names.” Then I slide my dick deep inside of her, sinking my teeth into her lip. Everything tightens around me as I tear through the barrier and pause.

My hand comes to the front of her throat. “You were a fucking virgin?”

“Was...” She slowly opens her eyes up onto mine. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be... fuck.” I go to lift myself off her when she grabs the back of my neck, holding me in position.

“I swear to God, Wicked, if you don’t finish this right now, I’ll get someone else to.”

I chuckle deeply, retracting my cock from her, but forcing her up with the grip on her throat.

Her eyes flash with mischief as if she knew exactly what the fuck she was doing when she did it.

“You ever threaten me with another man, Ruby, I’ll kill him and make you watch. And I don’t fuck to finish.” I throw her head back against the bed, making my way lower, down to her pussy. Widening her legs, I run my tongue over her clit and she moans so loudly I fly up from the bed.

Ripping the belt off my jeans on the floor, I come back to the bed and wrap it around her head, tightening it around her mouth.

Her green eyes flash up at me.

“Told you to be quiet...” I kiss her nose before going back down her body, circling her clit. I nibble my way down to her entrance and suck up the blood that’s dripping out before running my nose over her clit again and suck on it softly. Her back arches and her thighs drip with sweat when her hands fly to my hair to keep me in place.

I chuckle over her clit. “Hungry little slut.” Her body jolts and her legs shake as liquid squirts out of her, and I look between what just happened and her face.

“Wh—?” she asks, muffled by the belt.

“Fuck. I am fucked.” I lean down and lap up all of her release, flicking my tongue around her pussy before making my way up her body again. I reach for the buckle and she breathes out loudly.

“What did I do?”

I run the base of my thumb over the red indentations of the belt over her face. I need to see more marks on her... “Nothing. You’re actually fucking perfect, Ruby Rose...”

Her cheeks turn pink as she lowers herself back onto the bed, her hand finding my hair. “Can you kiss me?”

“You’ll never have to ask me that again. Fuck.” I lower my lips to hers and kiss her. Hard. Then softly. She matches my speed whatever I do, and when her hips start bucking up to meet me again, I pause, inching back to look down at her. “You sure?”

“You asking for consent?”

“I don’t know...” I grin down at her. “Would you rather I didn’t?”

She rolls her lips beneath her teeth to hide her smile, and I swear it’s the sexiest shit I’ve ever seen. “I’d rather you take what you want.”

I press against her and her legs widen. Pushing into her slowly, I hold my breath as she tightens around my dick like a fucking clamp.

“I want it to hurt...” she whispers. “I like the pain...”

“Shit.” I slam into her roughly, grabbing a fist of her hair and yanking her head back. When her face scrunches in pain, I slam my hand over her mouth and draw out before diving into her again, this time so hard her body moves up the bed.

I watch as every thrust, her eyes start to weaken and her body turns limp. Moving my hand from her mouth, I kiss her roughly as I fuck her so hard I feel the insides of her like a map I already know the path to.

She leans up to catch my lip between her teeth when I shove her back onto the bed. “Don’t fucking move.”

She moans, and I lean back onto my knees, lifting her from her ass and directing her on top of me.

“Fuck me until you come.” I bring my other hand behind her neck, pulling her down as she slowly lifts her hips up and rides over my thick

cock. "I wanna feel you drip down my dick."

Her body shakes and she rides harder, her tits brushing against my chest. When her breath speeds up, I bite her nipple into my mouth and reach for the front of her throat. Her pussy clenches and pulses around my cock as my balls tighten and blood turns hot. When I know she has finished, I lift her off my body with the hand around her throat and direct her onto her knees on the floor. Before I can grab my cock and shoot onto her face, she swallows my length whole, and as soon as my tip hits the back of her throat, I lose it. My knees shake and the hairs on my body stand to life as I release.

I drop to the floor beside her, resting my head against the mattress. Silence falls between us both as we try to catch our breath, and fuck. I wish I could say I feel bad, but I don't. And I thought just having one taste of her would be enough.

It isn't going to be.

I turn my head toward her, brushing her hair away from her face. "Come. I'll clean you up."

She peers up at me with glassy eyes. "You don't have to do that."

I scoop her up from the backs of her legs, carrying her to the bathroom that's adjacent to the bedroom. She laughs against my chest but wraps her arm around my neck.

Lowering her into the shower, I turn on the tap and wait for it to heat up. There are already soaps and shampoos in here, so I pull her under the water and squeeze some shampoo onto my hand.

She stands beneath the hot water, running her hand over her hair to plaster it down. "You're an expert at this..."

I pause before rubbing the soap over her tight little belly, leaving a trail of soap suds on the way down between her thighs. She sucks in a breath. "Actually, I don't fuck with anyone after I've fucked them."

"Charming..." she teases but lifts her hips when I circle her pussy.

"Not even close. And let's be honest, princess..." I bite her lip again, even though it's swollen from earlier. "You wouldn't be on my dick if I was."

Her head tosses back as she laughs, and I back her up against the glass, closing the distance between us. "Good thing you like pain..."

After our second attempt at a shower together, I make my way downstairs and to Victor's office as Ruby sorts the sheets on the bed. I told her to leave

them and that I'd do them later, but she insisted. Something about reading a romance book where the guy fucked her for a bet and showed the bloody sheets to his friends to prove he did it. Sounds like a book I'd read.

"I need you today." Victor says from his office chair, bringing the glass he's holding to his lips and swirling the deep amber liquid around.

I've given up on trying to get answers. I know it's all dead ends. When he wants me to know, he'll tell me why he chose me. But right now, I need to make the decision to comply to keep Poppy safe, and to keep Poppy safe, I need to be away from prison.

"Done." I lower myself onto the armchair tucked on the opposite side of his desk. His office is painted mahogany, with tarnished wood as a desk and high bookshelves. Their house reminds me of something you'd find on some uptight magazine about architecture and design. All white and black marble, grand staircase, and crystal chandeliers. No doubt the artwork hanging on their walls costs as much as the houses down the street we lived on. They drip money.

Victor moves from the chair to the open fireplace on the other side of the room. He kicks out his leg, keeping his eyes on me as one of his foot soldiers enters behind me. I think his name is Tony. Different from the one who usually drives Ruby around. "They're ready and waiting."

Victor leans forward, flicking his fingers over his shoulder but keeps his focus on me. "If you're in, I need you all the way in." His tongue runs over his lip.

"I'm not Italian, I have nothing to offer you as far as the outfit is concerned."

Victor keeps his eyes on me. Ruby gets her green eyes from him, since her mother's are blue. "That doesn't matter."

"Really?" I ask, kicking my foot out. "I find that hard to believe since all of this"—I wave my hand around the room—"feels a lot like old school mafia type shit. Not that new age bullshit."

A beat of silence stretches between us before he stubs out his cigar and nudges his head out the door. "Guess we'll find out."

An old church stands at the top of a hill where thick green grass grows against it. It's all withered white wood and cracked paint, but I know why he's taking me here.

Well, I have my guesses. I've come to realize Victor is about as consistent and reliable as mob bosses go.

I push my door open and stand from the back seat, closing it behind me and watching as another car pulls up beside ours.

Victor points to the city limo with the fingers that hold his cigar. "You don't know who I am, son..." He pauses right at the front of the car, before nudging his head toward the church. "But I'm about to show you, if you'll accept my initiation."

I know who he is to an extent. I've watched how they've walked around each other, and I've seen the Phoenix on the back of his hand. I know *exactly* who he is without knowing who he is. I don't ask questions because he doesn't.

"When you step through those church doors, everything you think you know about your life, about my life—is going to unravel. I'm going to show you things you're not going to want to share, but let me tell you something." He steps closer to me, his chest almost brushing against mine. I bring my eyes to his. "You won't be walking back out of those doors alive if you don't agree once you step through, so I'm giving you your chance right now, son." He pauses, puffing on his cigar before turning his head. "Do you agree?"

I've made some pretty shit decisions in my past. Got Poppy and me into a heap of trouble among other dark shit.

This is different.

I nod. "Yeah, take me through."

Following Victor up the stairs to the Gothic-style building, I pause when he widens the door, displaying a long dark corridor. Two men stand on either side of the door, both dressed in dark suits with shiny loafers on their feet.

Victor must sense my hesitation, because he turns to face me, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Ask me a question and I'll answer honestly, but after you've asked your three questions, you step through these doors, Wicked, or you get carried out in a body bag, and I'm not talking about the kind the pigs carry you out in." Victor La Rosa is mafia. His family is suits, guns, and high-end security, and his thick Italian accent is one you can't ignore.

"Was it by accident you picked Poppy and me up?"

He rolls his lit cigar around his mouth, the wrinkle lines in his skin crinkling every time he does it. No doubt he was a good-looking man in his younger years, but time has not been kind to him. Money has, though, judging by his expensive suits, cologne, and the Cuban cigars he always has hanging off his fingers. That's obviously leaving out the expensive mansion and cars too.

“Yes.” His eyes meet the young fuck from earlier. Ruby’s new soldier. Val. He comes back to me. “Next question.” He leans back slightly and the withered door creaks under his weight.

“You’re in the mafia...”

He studies me closely, and for the first time since he collected Poppy and me, I feel a wave of darkness hover over him and touch me. “I’m from Palermo, Sicily, son. Do you know what that means?” I don’t shake my head. He picks out tobacco from his tongue, flicking it onto the floor. “Means I don’t talk to anyone who isn’t a made man about my business, until he’s a made man.” I know he’s not going to continue, so I say the first thing that comes to my head.

“I’m not Italian. I can’t be a made man...”

His mouth curves upward as he presses the door farther open with one hand, gesturing inside with his other. “Actually, son, you are...”

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Ruby

It has been two weeks since I've seen my father, or Wicked, for that matter. It's like he fucked me, licked me better, made me feel some type of way about him, and then left. I don't want to ask my mom where he is because I never have before and I don't want to make it obvious that I'm mainly asking for Wicked. I could use Poppy, but, well, everyone with a set of eyes can see she's having the best time of her life without her brother hovering over her. Sometimes, Dad would be gone for weeks on end, even months. And like Poppy, it never bothered me because I had freedom when he wasn't here... but this is different. I'm afraid.

Afraid because I know that when Wicked comes back, he won't be the same boy who left. Because the dirty claws of my father will be well deep in his skin.

"So," Poppy says, pushing herself off the edge of the pool and floating toward where I'm sitting on a floating bed. "How are you a virgin? You literally have hot guys around you all the time. At school, and at home." I know she isn't talking about her brother, but I still flinch. "Is it the whole *dad being a mafia boss* thing?"

I smile tensely at her. Sunrays burn my skin, so I cup water from the pool and spill it over my tanned belly. “I’ve just never been interested, and trust me, the guys around the house *are not hot.*”

She turns her head to the side, pushing the glasses down the rim of her nose. The day Wicked and my dad left, my mom told me to take Poppy shopping. She had good taste. Different to mine with all her quirky, hippie-type patterns, but good. “What about him? Revio?”

I choke on a cough, reaching for my margarita that’s probably melted from the sun before leaning back in my sunbed. “No. Definitely not.”

“But he is who you are going to be with?”

I swallow the strong tequila. “Not if I have something to say about it.” Just as I finish the sentence, Revio saunters toward us, shoving his hand into his pocket and using his other to remove his glasses. He gets close enough to the pool to not get his loafers wet, before he kneels down and scoops up a cup of water playfully.

“Rubs, we have an event tonight. Papa’s orders.” My mouth slams closed. My heart races but not in the way that I like it to. In a perfect world, I won’t have to hold hands with Revio. It’s not that he does anything in particular to annoy me, I just don’t like him.

“What time?”

He flicks the water in his hand onto me. “I’ll pick you up at eight. It’s a charity gala for the homeless in the city.”

I nod. “I’ll be waiting.” I watch as he goes back the same way he just came. I know better than to give him ammunition, and as usual, what Papa says goes.

“Hey, can I come?” Poppy asks, sliding out of the floaty tube and pushing herself back to the surface of the water.

“Sure, but we will need to go shopping again.”

Before Poppy can even interrupt and ask if she can get a job or work around the house, my mom walks down the outside stairs, carrying a bottle of water. I watch as her long silk gown trails with the wind. My mama is beautiful. Papa knew exactly what he was doing the day he laid eyes on her.

“Hey, girls, make sure you use SPF fifty.” She lowers herself down onto the cobble path, dipping her French manicured foot into the water. She inhales, leaning her face up to the sun. Mama has golden skin that darkens through the year and bright blue eyes. Her soft wavy brown hair is always

glossy, and her face doesn't have a single wrinkle. She's only thirty-four but somehow still manages to look twenty-four.

"What's the matter, baby?" she asks, and I realize she's looking right at me, pushing the water around her feet while gawking between Poppy and me. "Rubs?"

I smile widely at her. "Nothing, Mama." Nothing but the fact that you deserve the world, and I don't mean the one we're currently living in.

"Oh!" Ma says, pushing up from the ground until she's standing straight. "Your cousins are coming in from Sicily."

Oh no.

"They're already here but won't get to the house until we're home from the event tonight. Make sure they don't trash the house, will you?" She starts rambling off in Arabic as she waltzes back into the house.

"Your cousins?" Poppy asks, and I slip from the blow-up bed and sink into the water.

"You don't even want to know."

"Oh... but I do!"

I splash water on her and throw a towel onto her lap. "Get out of the pool. Let's go spend Papa's money."

I dump all of our shopping bags onto my bed, tossing my sunglasses down with them. Thankfully, Poppy is easy to shop with. She takes what she likes and doesn't mess around.

She sighs, falling onto the chair near my patio door. "It doesn't make sense why your dad would take us in." She isn't wrong. I know more than anyone just how unforgiving my father is. The fact that he brought both of them home that night? It isn't from his kindness. That much I know.

"I'm sorry, I don't know anything."

"What's it like?" she asks, unzipping the gown cover and running her hand over the blue silk. "To be the daughter of the Sicilian mafia?"

"Honestly..." I make my way into my closet to bury my face. "I've not known any other way." There's a knock on the door before it's being swung open and one of my father's foot soldiers is standing on the other side.

"We're leaving in four hours."

I stare back at him until he closes my bedroom door again. Grabbing my phone, I dial glam so they can start on both Poppy and me. Fifteen minutes

later, Giana and Ria are walking through my door, makeup trolleys in tow with hairdryers and straighteners.

I tell them to start on Poppy first so I can quickly wash up and slip into a silk gown. Poppy is telling them a story about her brother, with both Giana and Ria fully immersed, when I glide my hand over the blank wall beside my bed. Poppy stops talking every now and then to see what I'm doing, but Giana and Ria urge her to continue.

"Come on, girl. We need more juice! So this brother. He's a bit of a player?" I knock on the wall, until I find the hard sound.

"No, he's not really. But he did sleep around with girls older than him."

I push my palm down on the wall and it pops open, revealing the discreet door.

"Wow!" Poppy jumps up from the bed, coming up behind me. "What—" I flick the light on and my collection lights up like the Fourth of July.

"Papa had been collecting them for me until I was old enough to start my own." My fingers wrap around the Beretta. Hitting the light back off, I shut the door and hike my leg up on my bedside drawers, strapping it to the holster around my thigh.

Poppy's eyes widen. "Why would you need that at a charity gala?"

My eyes shift to Giana, who pats her on the shoulder. "Come on, girl. You are done." I sit still as they work on me. I go for straight hair and dark makeup. My plan was to offset the sunshine yellow of my gown, but now I'm thinking it probably just looks like I chose the wrong dress. Giana and Ria are quiet as they prep me. They always are. They've been doing Mama since she was young, and now me. Other families use them too, but we are always priority.

After they've left, I scoop up my Chanel clutch and smile at Poppy. "You look beautiful. You ready?"

She nods, but I can see it in her eyes that she's figuring out who I am. Or at the very least, guessing. Fortunately for her, she will never know.

We make our way down to the lobby. I'm laughing at Poppy over her bad reinvention of Chibbs from *Sons of Anarchy* when I notice her face change.

Her eyes widen and she beams a bright smile. I follow her vision to the front door, where Papa and Wicked stand.

Papa smiles up at me so tightly the wrinkles in his cheeks fold in. "Principessa..."

“Papa...” I wince, gazing at Wicked over Papa’s heavy arm that’s around my back.

It’s Wicked, but it’s not...

Aside from the blank expression on his face, it’s noticeable that whoever he was before meeting my father, no longer exists. I made a promise I didn’t have the right to make with Poppy, because it’s obvious now. Papa didn’t take him or Poppy for no reason at all, and if he’s linked to the Family, he’s here for a purpose.

“Where’s your mother?” Papa whispers into my hair, and I quickly divert my eyes away from Wicked.

“She’s getting ready upstairs.”

He squeezes my arm reassuringly, turning to look at Wicked. “You’ll go with Wicked.”

I freeze. No doubt shock spreads over my face because my father adds, “And don’t fight me on this, principessa. There’s been some changes. You will go with Wicked.”

My mouth slams closed and I slowly bring my eyes back to Wicked, who is glaring at me now. His eyes darken when I don’t pull them off him and goose bumps prickle the back of my neck. Jesus fucking Christ. What the hell did I do to him, and why do I feel the first signs of indentations of his wrath cut beneath my flesh? *And again, what the hell did I do?* I’d be lying if I said it didn’t hurt a little, but I should have known better.

I don’t get to tell Papa that I understand before he disappears down the long hallway that leads to his office.

“I’ve missed you!” Poppy leans up and hooks her arms around the back of Wicked’s neck, only they don’t reach right around. It’s strange how two people who come from the same parents can be so contrastingly different. And I don’t mean that just in size or appearance either.

“Yeah, same here, Pop.” He releases her arms from around his neck, keeping his focus on me. “Go to the limo outside. We’ll meet you down there.” I watch as she bounces off through the doors, carrying the train of her gown with her. As each second passes that she’s gone, it becomes harder and harder to breathe. When she shuts the car door, Wicked takes a slow step toward me, closing the distance.

“You will listen to every fucking thing I have to say, Ruby.”

My mouth opens as fire rips through my veins. He may have my Papa on tap, but he will not have me. “You disappear for two weeks and think

you can come back and boss me arou—" His hand flies to my mouth, backing me up against a wall. My head slams against it and he slowly separates my thighs apart. I look between his hand and his eyes, and back again. His skin smells of cigars and whiskey mixed with clean linen, and his body holds against mine like a brick wall with no escaping.

"I didn't disappear. So let me tell you, *principessa*. You will listen to every word I say, because if you don't?" His brows lift, and I watch as a cloud moves over his dark eyes and the corner of his mouth curves in a slow grin. I once thought I wanted to know what his smile looked like. When he first came, I thought about what it may look like or how it would make me feel. I often thought that seeing his smile would soften the features that were already so tough, but I was wrong. It only makes him seem... wicked. Gone is the man who fucked me in a way I thought dreams were made of.

I shove my face out of his grip, pushing him away. I didn't expect him to move, but he does. Flipping open my clutch, I take out my compact mirror and fix my lipstick. When I find him in the reflection, I snap it closed. Something has changed since he's been gone. I know that he isn't that same broken boy who my father brought home with blood all over his hands, *if he ever was that person*. The boy who didn't speak often, but when he did, he made me feel alive beneath him.

The boy who showed me what it was like to die while being touched.

He is no longer the boy who kind of stole my heart with his bloody hands.

He is the boy who tore it from me without my permission.

"I'll listen only because I know my role within this family." He rounds my body and is standing directly opposite me. "But—" I jab a finger into his chest. "Don't ever manhandle me like that again."

When I shove past him to get to the front door, he calls out, "Pretty sure you didn't mind being thrown around a couple weeks ago..."

I pause in my steps before shoving through the doors and huffing out so loudly I'm sure it looks dramatic enough for the soldiers waiting outside.

I slide into the back seat, slamming the door loud enough for Poppy to jump in her seat.

"What happened?" she asks, her eyes wide on me.

"You remember how I told you that my father wouldn't change him?"

She takes a champagne flute from the center of the side console. "Yes."

“Well...” I glare at her, ignoring the fact that the door swings open, “...I was mistaken.”

The door slams closed and I’m painfully aware of how close he is to me when his thigh brushes against mine.

Poppy looks between the both of us. “Ah...” She clears her throat. “Is there something I should know?”

“No.” I flash her a smile, shuffling away from Wicked. “Nothing at all.”

Wicked’s hand comes to my knee, squeezing it tightly. “Yeah. Nothing for you to worry about, Pop.”

Poppy’s wary eyes rest on me. “O—okay.” She points to the both of us. “Then why is Revio not taking Ruby?”

Wicked’s grip tenses on my knee. A warning, or a promise. I’m not sure which yet.

I shake my head, my mouth splitting into a wide smile. “It’s complicated.” It isn’t. Something has clearly happened between the two families, and it makes me nervous. The La Rosa and Gambino families have had a close relationship for a long time. Since before Papa and Grandpapa snuck over on the boats years and years ago. Papa is old school, though, where Jo Gambino is new school. Both deadly, but different styles. No doubt if there is some tension between us, the Cupola will have to interfere and no one wants that. Not even Papa.

My phone buzzes in my clutch, and I unlock the hatch, opening to a text from Revio.

“You skipped out on marrying me. You should probably ask your new guard why...” My blood turns to ice as the words replay in my mind before I quickly shut it off and shove it back into my clutch.

“Who was that?” His voice coats over my skin like it belongs there, and for the sixth time since I met Wicked, I wish I didn’t have him so close and near. I like old Wicked. The one who at least smirked when he put his hands down my pants.

I don’t like this one. The one who doesn’t even *want* to put his hands down my pants.

I huff on a breath and stare out the back window, ignoring his question. He chuckles, but instead of it being his easy-going tone that he used to use with me, it grazes over me like sandpaper and now I’m worried how I’m going to cleanse myself from it. “You can play that game for a bit. I’ll allow that.”

“Okay, I’m going to ask...” Poppy leans forward, narrowing her eyes on her brother. “What is with the suit, and why the fuck are you both fighting like you’ve had—” She slams her mouth closed as her eyes widen in shock. “Oh my God! You’ve been together!”

“Poppy!” I snap at her lowly, careful not to make it a big deal. “No—” “—yeah, so?” Wicked raises dark brows at her. “Sit back down, Pop.” We travel the rest of the way in silence, and I swear by the time the limo is pulling up to the curb of the hotel, my skin is on fire and my fingers are itching to get me the *hell* out of this car. At this point, I’d take Revio’s easy drama over Wicked’s realism.

I swing the door open as soon as the limo stops and rush down the rolled-out red carpet. I don’t care to take in the details of the designs, because I have one place to get to and one only, and that’s as far away from Wicked as possible. I speed up my steps when I see the opening doors to the conference room, shoving through the entry, pausing when everyone stops chatting. Heads turn toward me. It’s like I’m five years old again and busting into Papa’s office during important meetings.

I don’t know who all is here, but I’m guessing it’s the usual. The Cosa Nostra families, the ones we’re not currently beefing with, and their wives.

A hand comes to my hip, forcing me backward and everyone goes back to their conversations. It’s as though the music starts playing again and the chatter gets louder.

“You’re to stay beside me, Ruby,” he whispers from behind, and I hate the way my knees turn to jelly in response.

I bite down on the inside of my cheeks to stop from shoving his hands off me. “Or what?”

Wicked moves around my body, leaning so close into my face he almost kisses me. “Go fuck around and find out.” I shove out of his way and make my way to our table that’s near the front stage. I read over the little gold cards with our names and see The Dragon written in cursive that’s seated right beside me.

My finger glides over the little piece of paper, just as Wicked takes it from my hand and flips it downward onto the table. “You don’t need that.”

“You know, you’re really starting to annoy me.”

“Really?”

Finally, I bring my eyes up past the angry veins pulsing in his neck, and to his sharp jaw and pouty lips. “Yes—” I settle on his dark eyes. “Really.”

I wasn't sure how tonight was going to play out with Giovi and Marcu. They've, if anything, been protective over me my whole life. The thought brings a smile to my face. Wicked may have Papa wrapped around his finger, but my cousins are made men and are sixth-generation La Rosas. Wicked doesn't have a leg to stand on, no matter how big, or scary and mean he may look. I know he's not as bad as a La Rosa. No one is as bad as a La Rosa.

"You coming home with me tonight too?" I ask, not bothering to hide the smile.

He raises his brow. "Sit the fuck down."

I lower myself onto the chair as the gala begins. I hate these things. The auctions, the fancy way to say *I'm rich as fuck, but I'm also pretending to be a good person*. No one here is a good person. I remember the first charity gala I attended as a little girl. I was ten or eleven, and Mama made me wear a ridiculous gown that frilled around my shoulders like fat puffy cushions. I didn't talk to her for twenty-four hours after that. Safe to say, I was a bit of a brat. She plays house and my father loves and treats her like a precious piece of gold, but make no mistake... There's one commandment my father *does* break, and that's the *cheat on my perfect wife* commandment.

I give it two hours before I'm picking up my clutch and making my way out to the front lobby, grabbing my phone out and swiping it unlocked when I see Giovi's pearly white smile flash over my screen.

"Baby girl..." he purrs, and my cheeks sting from my grin. "Is it about that time?"

I laugh, grabbing the packet of smokes I snatched from my mother's stash. Pulling one out, I bite on the end and light the tip. "Yes. Please. But Papa has someone new stuck on me, so—"

"—you know we can handle Papa La Rosa's little hellhounds." Before I can blow out the cloud of smoke, a bright orange Lambo slides around the corner with Fifty Cent thumping out the windows loudly.

It skids to a halt in front of me and my idiot cousin's face fills the space of his empty window, flashing me a wide *fuck you, I'm a badass* smile. Gio is good for those. "Get in."

I toss the cigarette and lift the door up high before shutting it closed just in time to see Wicked at the door.

Gio floors it and my body crashes back against the chair as he drives us out, turning the music down a smidge. “Revio still reminding you how much he can’t wait to marry you?”

I shake my head, turning around to face him. “No, and honestly, I’d rather take his fluffy bullshit than the savage on my ass right now.”

“Well, whoever it is, I can kick their ass.” Leaning over, I plant a kiss on his soft cheek before sitting back in my seat. “Where we going?”

“Party at Papa La Rosa’s lake house.”

I lean my head against the back of the leather. “Are you kidding, does he know?”

“Who do you think planned it?” Gio grins at me again, his curly blond hair moving with the wind. Gio and Marcu’s mom is Papa’s sister. They’re my first cousins, but they call my father Papa too. They didn’t have much to do with their biological father, who was from another family.

“He actually told you to throw a party at the lake house?”

“Yes!” Gio smirks, dropping the gears down. We fly onto the on-ramp as he turns the volume up on the radio. “Now chill out and enjoy the ride out.”

“Shit!” I pull my phone out of my bag and open Poppy’s chat. “I should have brought Poppy with me.”

“Poppy, eh?” Gio nudges me with his shoulder while looking at the road ahead. “She hot?”

Hey! Sorry I dipped out before you. This is the address to the party that is happening tonight. Don't tell your brother.

I knew he would be coming anyway, especially since this whole thing was my dad’s idea, but I still wanted to add it to the end. You know. For safety reasons.



Wicked

I sit in the corner of the dark alleyway, leaning my forearms on my thighs as I watch Victor circle the man who is hanging up by his ankles from a fire exit at an old apartment in downtown Chicago.

“Please... I didn’t—I don’t know who it is, *padrino*, I swear...”

“Liar.” Tony Carpela rolls spit around his mouth and aims it right on the man’s face.

The fact that whoever Victor has hanging in the center of the alleyway is a made man should worry everyone who is here right now, bearing witness. Technically speaking, you can’t whack off a made man unless you’ve got clearance to do so, but by the looks of this, Victor doesn’t need approval, and I can’t say I blame him.

“Why were you following my daughter?” Victor pulls out a blade from beneath his gray suit, running it down the jugular vein on his neck. “Hmmm? You and I both know that you would know I’d have someone on her, so that tells me that you want my attention.”

The tip of the blade sinks into the soft flesh of the man, and blood starts trickling down, hitting the asphalt every few seconds. “You got my attention

now..." There's more muffling before Carpela rolls toward me, his hands in his pockets and his suit somewhat disgruntled.

"You know he's going to kill him, right?"

I lean back slightly, kicking out my foot. "Yeah, I'm just trying to figure out a reason why he shouldn't."

Tony inches down, his gray suit jacket spoiled with blood. Probably from getting the man into the car. Since we were making our way out to whatever bullshit party the La Rosas are throwing before we ran into this motherfucker following their car, we're all still dressed for a damn gala and less for murder.

"I swear!" the man calls out. "Look, there's, there's—a man. He's young, sort of, and dresses like you. He paid me five thousand dollars to follow her."

Victor looks over his shoulder, and from beneath the streetlight, he seems wider.

I stand, rolling my shoulders back and slowly making my way beside Victor. Tilting my head, I follow the trail of blood. "What?"

"If we kill him, it's not going to take care—" My hand flies to the handle of the knife that's only partially sunk into his neck. I twist slowly as his screams turn to gargling whispers.

"Repeat yourself, but this time leave a name." I keep twisting the blade.

"I-I don't know! Ok—" I lean down this time so I'm eye level with him. His eyes are blue, but not like Poppy's. They're more like the color of the bottom of an old pool floor after it has been left all winter.

"Do I look like the kind of man who doesn't know how to make your final minutes in this world feel like hours?" I lean in closer. "I can think of forty-two ways that I could kill you, and none of them are quick." My thumb flies to the inside of his right eye and I sink it into the socket, watching as blood spills over my hand. "Now. Tell me a name, and I'll make sure I won't pay your family a visit."

"We don't touch family," Tony whispers from behind. "You gonna tell him we don't touch family?"

Victor doesn't miss. "He seems busy. Are you?"

"Shit, man..." Tony mutters, stepping back.

"Okay—shit!" His bottom lip trembles. "I don't know a name! H-he had a tattoo on his face. A cross. He drove an expensive car. I swear that's all I know!"

I shoved him away, pulling out my gun from my holster and unloading three rounds into his skull then wiping the tip of my gun against my suit. “We need to figure out who the fuck these motherfuckers are, right after I go babysit your kid.” I turn, waiting for both Victor and Tony to follow me to the waiting black SUV. “What?”

“Nope—” Tony, who is apparently Ruby’s favorite uncle, shakes his head, rubbing his slightly overweight belly. “You are a real fucking problem.”

Victor laughs, patting him on the back while making his way to me. He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a tiny tin, popping it open and offering me a cigar. “Proud of you, son.”

I didn’t do it for his pride.

I didn’t think.

Tony gets into the car that’s parked behind the Range Rover, just as Victor leans in, handing me the keys. “I want you at that lake house tonight. Watch our girl.” I wrap my fingers around them, watching as he heads to his parked Maserati. Rounding the SUV, I put the car into reverse and do just that...

Go watch *my* girl.

But not because it’s for him... or even me.

I slow the SUV to a stop, pulling up the emergency brake when it won’t stop rolling down the deep-set driveway. This is hardly the average lake house, but I don’t know what I was expecting since I know the kind of money this family swims in.

I take the keys out of my pocket and cut the headlights, sitting there in silence. I need it. The silence between all of the noise that I’d walked. Even thinking back to my initiation, I should have known better. Known that there was more to why Victor took Poppy and me in. That kind of charity just doesn’t exist in our world. Everything is a transaction. The worst of it all is that I can’t tell fucking *anyone* what was said to me that night. The night I walked through the chapel’s doors before cutting myself open and bleeding over an Angel card.

I don’t think I’ll ever be able to tell anyone. No one except for those who were present, that is...

I shove the door open, my shoes hitting the soft blades of grass. There’s a large tree planted in the center of a wraparound driveway that directs you

around a lake house constructed of glass walls and deep stained wood. There are three floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the front, with a ceiling-less porch that hugs around the entire box style building.

I walk straight past one of the soldiers who is standing at the front door. He bows his head and I offer him a tight smile. I don't recognize him, but then that's not uncommon.

His hand reaches for the gold handle, but I shake my head. "No. I'll go around." It's a full moon, so it wasn't as dark as it otherwise usually would be. A bright glow bounces off the glass walls, which I quickly realize aren't glass but mirrors. The music becomes louder as I take a left turn to the side of the house. There's a large area of grass, but behind that is an abundance of trees. When I hit the final corner, I pause in my footsteps, taking in the scene.

Fuck me. It's nothing like the parties I went to back home in Detroit. The lake is down below, with a long jetty that stretches out into a dark bed of water. In the far distance, you can see other lights from houses on the other side, but it is secluded enough to know that no one can see you.

Or hear you.

Goose bumps prickle the back of my neck as I shove my hands into my suit pockets. Fucking hate wearing this thing. It's definitely something I will need to get used to. If ever.

Wu-Tang thumps through the speakers, and little lights hang above in the trees before leading toward the jetty. The yard spreads out wide enough to not seem so congested, but there aren't that many people here. It's clearly an invite-only party.

My eyes land on Poppy, who's sitting on a lounge chair beneath a large tree, laughing at whatever that girl who is sitting beside her just said. I know who it is, Betty Peterson, a.k.a. Ruby's BFF. The music isn't loud, but there's an air of uncertainty that hovers over the space. I still don't know why Victor called this party, but I'm sure that by the end of it, we will all know.

"You know you're painfully obvious..." she says from behind me. Clearly, she's drunk. Her voice slow and dripping with liquor. She must come closer because I can feel the heat of her body on my back. I keep my eyes on Poppy. Sure, I'd jump in front of a bullet for the brat behind me, but my sister is still my priority. "How does it feel to not have control of me here?" She's drunk. Too drunk.

I follow her slow movements as she rounds the front of me, taking the step down and looking up at me from a bent head. On any other occasion, I'd fuck the stupid out of her, but right now, she's just pissing me off.

Her swollen lips wrap around the top of the bottle, and I watch as she tilts her head back and swallows.

Without unlocking my eyes from her, I reach for the frosted glass of Grey Goose, removing it from her hands.

"Hey!" she whines, reaching for it.

I pull it away from her, stopping her body with my own. "You've had enough."

"No—I—"

"You—" I grip her from around her tiny chin, forcing her eyes up on mine. "Have had enough." She's annoying me because while I should be watching Poppy, her drunk stupor has me distracted. Yeah, Ruby is hot. Yeah, I will enjoy leaving my marks on her any time I get, and yes, I know how fucked up I am because I took her virginity fully knowing that the girl could end up being a grade-A clinger, but right now, I don't want to deal with her.

Her frown dissolves and a slow curl of a smile touches the corner of her lip as she looks around my body. "Are you sure you want to boss me around?" Whatever the fuck she's looking at has her feeling bold. "This is my cousin." She leans around me and drags the body of whoever he is down the step where she's standing. He has blond curly hair, tanned skin, and a build that honestly is unimpressive.

"Am I supposed to be scared?" I ask her, not bothering to pay him any attention.

"Yeah, ah... You're on your own..." And even though I don't know him, he clearly knows me. The boy leans in, kissing her on the cheek and disappearing through the sea of people. I can see out of the corner of my eye the times he looks back to me but carries on doing what he's doing.

"What the fuck?" Ruby spins around, following her cousin. "He's usually so protective over me."

I shove her out of the way. "Just so you know..." I cock my head to the side and trace my eyes all over her body. From her face, down to her tits, past her semi-exposed belly, and down her legs, before coming back up and meeting her at eye level. "I'm not here for you." Her smile falls slightly, and I carry on through the bed of people, needing to get to Poppy. When I

look back to the spot I saw Poppy moments ago, she's gone, and Betty has her tongue down some idiot's throat.

I take heavy steps toward the tree, grabbing the guy's shirt from his collar and shoving him backward and off Betty.

"What the fuck, man?" He runs his hand over his hair.

Betty's eyes come to mine. "Oh, hey."

"Where's Poppy?"

Her eyes dart over my shoulder as she uncrosses her legs while shoving her skirt back down. I don't care for Betty much, but she and Ruby are basically sisters, so Victor did tell me that I was to watch out for her too. Not to the extent that I go out of my way, but at least if she looks distressed. Hard pass and probably won't do it, but whatever.

"She was right here..." She turns toward the now empty spot, her brows curving in, confused. Pushing up from her chair, she stands and starts twisting and turning, scanning the area. "She was just here."

I turn back around, my eyes landing on Ruby, who's following my footsteps down. "Did you see where she went?"

She rolls her eyes and I have to fight with myself not to wrap my hands around her throat and pin her up against the tree. "She's probably pashing someone in the house, Wicked. Stop being so fucking dramatic. She's safe here, or have you forgotten where we are?"

I haven't, but where we are is precisely the issue. She doesn't know that, though, of course. The naïve little brat would *never* know.

I move around her, circling the smaller groups of people talking and drinking, before going back to the side of the house and to the front, where the guard stands near the front door, exactly where I left him.

I point to the house. "You seen Poppy?"

He looks from left to right, taking the steps down to meet me. "No? No one has come around the front."

I leave him behind and push through the front door. I don't see anything. My vision caves in around me in a single circle, as if I have tunnel vision just for her. Pulling out my phone, I hit the second floor while tapping her name on my contacts list. Her phone rings three times—

"If I haven't answered my phone, it's because you've called me off a number not in my contacts. Rude. I feel violated. Don't call me unless you know me. K, thanks, BYE!"

I want to pin her right beside Ruby on that tree, but I shove through every bedroom, clearing each one before realizing she's not in here either. Jogging down the stairs, I exit through the back doors, hitting her name again, only this time it goes straight to voicemail. Dread fills my veins when I realize something isn't right. Poppy may be a headcase and the equivalent to a stray cat when it comes to keeping track of her, but she'd never purposely ignore me. She knows how much I stress and how controlling I am. She knows it'll just be easier to answer the phone, tell me she's fine and to stop being a dickhead, and then hang up on me. She'd never do this.

Call it brother intuition or whatever, but when I push through the back doors that open back onto the same area I was just talking with Ruby, it's as though I see the party in a different light. The groups of people who are here seem older. Not the age group I would expect for Ruby to be around. The alcohol isn't sprawled out, and no one is being messy and stupid. Aside from the small group near Betty, who is the same that Ruby always hangs with, the other people are almost out of place.

I jog down the steps, stopping right beside Ruby and Betty, and the other boys they have around. I notice one of them from the party earlier. "Who the fuck are all these people?" I gesture out to the people behind us. The energy in the air shifts when Ruby turns to follow my sight.

I watch her face as her mouth twists into a confused line. "I—I don't actually know."

"Jesus fuck!" I whack the bottle of vodka out of her hand. "How fucking much have you had to drink to not notice any of these people until just now?"

"I know—I'm—" I ignore her, turning back to face the side of the house where the freshly cut lawn merges into the forest.

"What's behind these trees?"

Ruby dials someone on her phone, bringing it to her ear before hanging up. "I don't know. I've never been back there. I'm guessing trees?"

I glare at her. "You're not funny."

"I wasn't trying to be." Her eyes fall to the ground, but I don't have time to coax her bruised and drunk ego.

I point to the people who are here. "Call your daddy and tell him there has been a compromise, and if I don't find my sister? When I get back, people are dying."

“Wait!” Ruby jogs after me. “I’m coming with you.” I ignore her as she continues to dial Victor. It’s not until we hit the entrance to the forest that I turn and see they all fucking followed. Boys in tow. Climbing over the fence, I land on the ground in a thud and turn on the flashlight on my phone. The light beams, and I scan across the fence line, looking for any movement of ground. It’s obvious that people haven’t been on this side. Not a single footprint or shoeprint.

“Yo!” one of the boys calls out. “There’s a boot print...”

I turn back around, colliding with Ruby. Moving her out of my way with the back of my hand, I stop where Jackson is, narrowing my eyes on a clear print of a boot. Lifting my light up, I start following that same trail. The prints are clear as fucking day, but there’s only one set.

“Papa!” Ruby yells, and I spin around, pointing the light from my phone directly on her face. She winces. “Sorry.”

It’s probably not fair to blame her, but I can’t help it right now. If I wasn’t distracted by her stupidity, I would have seen where the fuck Poppy went.

“Poppy has gone, and—”

I snatch the phone off her, continuing our trek farther into the woods.

“You there?”

“What’s happening? Talk to me.”

“Something’s not right. There are people here who Ruby doesn’t know.”

“Wesley on the front door?” he asks calmly.

“Yeah, but the kid is dumb as fuck. Poppy is missin’.” The silence between us stretches wide. Wide enough to make my fucking skin crawl with anticipation. “And he claims she didn’t skip from the front.”

“Alright, keep going. I’ll be there soon.” I hang up the phone, and just as I do, I see a new message on mine and click the unknown number to open it.

She’s not there.

I stop walking, and everyone around me does the same.

Typing off a new reply, I don’t even hit send before another comes in. **If you want to see her alive again, we need to make a deal.**

I finally punch the final letters and hit send. **Who is this?**

Another message comes through. **Not important. What is, is that you need to make that deal to see your precious sister again, Wicked. You**

need to go back to the party, tell everyone you know where she is, and bring little Ruby La Rosa with you.

I read over the words, and then read them again. *What?*

“What is it?” Ruby asks from ahead, and I raise my eyes up to hers. If this has something to do with her papa, then I’m getting to the bottom of it.

I type out my reply, shoving my phone into my pocket. “That was Poppy. She’s fine but wants us to go and get her.” I point to Ruby and me.

“Oh thank God!” Ruby’s hand comes to her chest. She shoves through the grass as everyone starts making their way back to the party. “No offense, but I’m going to kick her ass for stressing us out.”

Slipping into the SUV, I open my phone to another text as Ruby says goodbye to all her little partygoers. **We’re going to play some games. Do you still remember how?** I stop typing. Darkness clouds over my vision.

Who the fuck is this?

I didn’t need to ask. The problem with trauma is it leaves its scars behind, so it knows exactly where to find them again when it comes back. And it does. It always comes back.

I think you know...

I squeeze the phone in my hand, slamming my palm over the push-to-start button just as Ruby slides into the passenger seat, slowly lowering her purse onto the ground in front of her while looking at me as if one would a rabid dog.

“What’s wrong?”

I slam the gear into reverse, not wanting to tell Ruby because that would mean this is right. That would mean he has come back to deliver his promise like I knew he would... And now... now I know all of our lives are about to change...

Wicked

Six-years-old

I knew some things more than others. I knew pain. I knew that if I cut myself deep enough, I could feel all of my pain release, but the problem was that all I knew was pain. And to release it all... well... I would simply need to die. I watched anyway, though. I sat in the corner and I watched because I knew it was my time soon. Everyone knew it was my time. The chapel was as old as time. Well, it was older than me. The wooden benches were empty, but dark cloaks stared back at me from one side, where the other wore white. Where the dark cloaks stood with hoodies on, animal masks covering their faces—some elongated cows, some deer, some—a little more human-like, to the right, the Pure stood calm, tall, and at peace. Their robes weren't hiding their faces, but white paint covered them. Everyone was silent. Silent because tonight was a ritual, one we had waited for.

"Do you think it's going to hurt?" a voice asked from behind me, and I turned over my shoulder slightly to see another boy, around the same age as me, chewing on his lip nervously. Then my eyes skipped down the line. Head after head. Kid after kid. All the same as me, only different.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "We can only hope that if it doesn't, death takes us first."

Present

"Wicked, you're scaring me..." Ruby's hand brushes my arm and I pull away from her, driving us farther onto the highway.

"Good. You should be scared."

"Why!" She looks between the highway and me. "What is happening?"

I think over all the different ways I can tell Ruby without involving her. Now I wish Poppy being taken was Cosa Nostra related, then that way I'd know that I could blame someone else. Take my anger out on other people, and I know, at the end of the day, Victor would make sure we got her back. *He had to.* But now? Now I know the chances of me seeing my sister again are slim to none.

"Wicked!" Ruby yells, and I finally whip my head around to look at her.

Her green eyes are wide on me, her little mouth slightly open. She has an angular jaw and high cheekbones, and a natural golden glow to her skin. Her usual siren-shaped eyes look wider than usual, worry etched into her features.

“Whatever it is, I can handle it!”

I drive us onto the highway that takes us to the outskirts of Chicago. I need to be off this motorway if I want to go the speeds I need to go to get to Poppy in time.

“We’re not who you think we are.” As soon as the words leave my mouth, I want to snatch them back. “Poppy and I?” I squeeze the leather steering wheel. “We are not who you think we are.”

“And who are you?” Ruby asks, her tone gentle.

“You’re about to find out.” I reach for my phone, hitting call on the number that was texting me.

Three rings and the phone clicks over. “One can hope you have made the right decision.”

I place my phone in my lap, ignoring Ruby. “Things have changed.”

Silence, and I know that these are dangerous words to speak while he has Poppy. “Mmhmm, I figured so. Which is why I have my security sitting all safe here.”

I watch as the little hand on the speedometer falls over to one hundred. “You didn’t tell me I was Italian.”

“Well, you were raised here, but yes, your biological father was Italian.” My eyes slam closed. “And yes, you are from a line of very powerful men in the Cosa Nostra. I’m guessing La Rosa made you? Smart motherfucker that one is.”

I clear my throat.

“What the fuck is going on?” Ruby’s tone drops. “You piece of shit. I swear to fuck if you’re working with the cops, I’ll kill you myself!”

Just when I think she’s nothing like her father and all her mother, she says some gang shit like that.

I turn to face her, my lip curled. “First of all, shut the fuck up. The day I walk on that side of the law is the day you can take my nuts—”

She raises a perfectly arched brow. “I would take more than that.” And there it is. The little mafia princess finally looking more like what she should.

I smirk at her but go back to the road. “Not just that.”

“The girl?” he adds, and before I can say anything, I feel the temperature in the car drop. Her fear is intoxicating. It’s like she left a trail of it wherever she ran, but only I could sense it.

“Yeah—she’s hot.” My smirk deepens, and I see her head whip toward me in the corner of my eye. “And she’s got a tight little pussy.”

“Fuck you!” she screams, and I choke on a laugh as I move the phone away from her.

“She’s got a mouth as dirty as she fucks, but here’s the deal...” I add, leaning away from her so she doesn’t kill us both. “I can’t kill her, or her father. As much as I promised this transaction, there are things you left out telling me too, like who I am, and the fact that I have the affiliations that I do. You promised our freedom for her, you didn’t say anything about Victor...”

“Where are you taking me?” Her fight dies out as she leans her head on the window. I watch as she follows the lights that pass us on the road, reading every sign we go by.

I bare my teeth, cranking my neck. “I’ll do the transaction because I promised, but you gotta leave Victor out of it. That’ll be too messy. It’s bad enough you’re taking Ruby.” She’s silent now, and just when I think he’s not going to respond, he clears his throat. “See you in the morning.”

Then the line goes dead. We have a four-hour drive ahead of us, and that’s a whole lot of time put between her and me... and what could happen between now and then. I need to figure out a way that I don’t blow this whole fucking shit up.

She wants me to be a lost little pet for her papa, but she doesn’t know that I’m the wolf who would find her.



Ruby

It feels as though time has been suspended in the air for the past three hours. I haven't spoken another word to Wicked, because as much as I want to know what the hell is happening, I'm smart enough to know not to waste my breath. If he wanted to tell me, he would have by now. Me acting a fool and demanding answers that I know I'm not going to get sounds exhausting. I thought I knew who he was, who Poppy was, but I'm beginning to feel like maybe I didn't. That my papa let a snake into our home, and now we are going to pay for it for years to come.

I lean forward and push the power button on the radio. Goose bumps break over my skin and I run my hand up and down my bare arm.

Wicked reaches for the back seat, tossing a hoodie on my lap. "Put it on." His voice is low but laced with a dark undertone that he has done well keeping away from me.

I push the material off my thighs. "I'm good. Thank you."

"*Principessa, when you're in the presence of disrespect, you keep yours. Don't let anyone take a stepping stone away from you. You earned that spot.*" I close my eyes and inhale a shaky breath. All of Papa's life lessons and stupid one-liners somehow make sense now. I always thought I would

be protected. Untouchable. I thought I was unbreakable, but in the right hands, anyone can be fragile.

“Stop being a stubborn bitch, Ruby.” His voice is just below the song that’s playing low in the background.

I don’t know who sings it, and if I had my phone, I would for sure Shazam it right now.

“Hey!” He snaps his fingers in front of my face, but when I don’t give him the attention he so desperately wants, fingers wrap around my chin, forcing my eyes onto his.

I should look back to the road. To make sure we’re not about to crash, but I can’t find the will to care.

His eyes were the first thing I noticed about him. They were dark, void of anything light, but there was an animalistic kindness to him that I thought I always felt. In the shadow of his touches, his kisses, and then other things. He... I thought he was just like me.

I was wrong.

He’s just like the rest of them.

His fingers tighten around my chin. “Put the fucking hoodie on and go to fucking sleep.”

I shove my face out of his grip, and he drops his hand to the center, cursing before hitting the radio louder.

Good. If anything, since he’s kidnapping me, he can let me sit in peace. Leaning the chair back, I curl into a ball, facing the door and fisting my hands beneath my chin.

Every single man in my life has done what Wicked is doing now. I thought he would be different. He’s worse than all the rest of them because he makes you believe he’s not like that at all. Hides his evil behind a mask, and it’s not until it’s too late when you see him.

My eyes get heavier as I close them to the sound of the tires against the asphalt. I hope that wherever he takes me, they make it quick.

I knew why he was here, but yet I watched him anyway. He’d come to the house, do shit with Papa, and then come and see me in my bedroom. I would still be awake before he would leave because why wouldn’t I? He always brought me treats. Papa said to tell him what happened after every time. I was sure it was so he could steal my treats.

Tonight would be no different. I watched as he looked down at his gold watch around his wrist, before tapping Papa on the shoulder to bid him

good night. I swooped up my teddy and quickly rushed into bed, slipping beneath my cotton sheets and sighing when I felt the cool material touch my hot skin. I was hot because I was excited.

Mama and Papa always fought after Antonio visited. I didn't know why she didn't understand... Antonio had the BEST treats I could have ever asked for. And he would watch me eat them, and even feed them to me.

I ducked farther beneath the sheet, squeezing my eyes closed and holding my breath when I heard the creak from my bedroom door. My bedroom was already dark, because I was always supposed to be asleep at this time. I wasn't. It was eight p.m.! I wasn't four years old anymore! I was five! Mama said I could stay up later now. She lied. She does that. She would say it was different if adults simply changed their mind, but to me, it kind of felt the same.

Something heavy sank into my mattress and I had to contain my excitement by holding in a deep breath. I knew he was there. Antonio! Papa's oldest friend. I mean, I think. I had known him all of my life, so I was sure of it, and anyway, Ma and Pa would never allow anyone dangerous around me. My big cousin Marcu made me sit down and watch Goodfellas one time, and then Scarface and then The Godfather. I think Papa was a little like Don Vito.

"Principessa, are you awake?" His voice was a whisper. I quickly scrunched the sheet away from my face, enough to peek out of the top. He wore a suit like Papa, only no jacket. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows. He had long, skinny arms and legs. He was very tall. Taller than even Papa!

His fingers came to the edge of my sheet, pulling it down gently away from my face. "There's my pretty girl." My cheeks stung when my smile beamed. I always loved seeing Antonio. He made me feel safe. Like I mattered and wasn't only important because of who my papa was.

His hand disappeared into his pocket before he laid it out in front of me, downside. His hair was slicked back, his eyes a light brown, kinda the same color as my teddy bear, and his skin was slightly paler. I think he met Papa through Mama because they were also friends.

He smiled, the dark hair around his face grazing his collar. "I got you something."

I rested my little hand in his, picking up the piece of candy he held in his hand. My heart fluttered in my chest and my blood rushed through my ears

so fast I could hear it. I took the small piece of candy, pinching it between my two fingers and rolling it between. It was a tiny hard-shell candy. They were small, but so tasty. It tasted of fresh raspberries just picked from the garden. My thumb nail glided over the tiny indentation on the outside. A tiny ballerina, just for me!

“Go on, my little princess. Taste it. It’s a new flavor.” A new flavor! He only gave me new flavors for my birthdays! This was exciting.

“But it’s not my birfday?” My eyes widened.

His smile deepened, as he leaned down closer until his lips were hovering over my forehead. “I know, but it will be soon.”

Placing the candy on the tip of my tongue, I fell back onto the bed and giggled as the sugar from blueberries and cotton candy slid down my throat. “This is so lovely.” I closed my eyes as his lips grazed my forehead.

“Isn’t it?” He trailed tiny kisses down from my forehead to my cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” My eyes opened onto him, this time he was so close I could feel his breath on my lips.

He moved, and his face looked funny, like he was moving slower than usual. It was the candy! That’s why it was my favorite. “Who’s my favorite little girl?”

I smiled, biting into my lip. “I am.”

My body jolts and I hit my head on the side of the door. Opening my eyes, I stare at the smooth leather of the upholstery. That’s right. I’m still here. Stuck in a realm of where I was tricked into thinking someone was good. Good enough to sleep with, anyway. Good enough to be the kind of big brother I thought every girl needed.

I was tricked.

“You awake?” His voice is drenched in sleep. I find myself aching from the familiarity of his tone. It was the same kind he used the morning we woke up together.

I roll to the front, pressing the button to raise my chair. It’s barely dark. Right between yesterday ending and a new day starting. Within ten minutes, a new sun would be peeking out behind the mountains and everything from yesterday would be in the past.

“Can I ask you something?” I turn my head to face him, and that’s when I feel the collar of his hoodie graze my cheek. I grab the end, looking between the hoodie and his face.

“You put it on yourself in your sleep.” Tilting his head to the side, I follow the sharp line of his jaw up to below his ear. I have so many questions I want to ask, but none of which I trust he will answer honestly. “Back to your question?” He doesn’t look directly at me.

“Why are you doing this to Papa and me? We helped you...”

He chuckles breathlessly, the kind that only comes from his chest. “You truly think your father did this to *help* me?”

When I don’t answer, and not at all because I can’t take my eyes off the framing of his face, he stares back at me and it’s like being gut punched.

“Fuck, of course.” He shakes his head, cursing beneath his breath as if he should have known all along.

The sun rises behind him and now all of his features are somehow accentuated. His soft dark hair that’s messy from lack of sleep, and his perfectly symmetrical face that again, somehow, even though is quite clearly perfect, still has a roughness around the edges. His beauty isn’t subtle, it’s a slap in the face to the human race. It’s a warning that some men were handcrafted by evil just to get your attention long enough to steal you.

“I don’t know!” My hands fly up and I’m annoyed at myself for showing interest. Interest in my impending death. “I know Papa! He is a hard man, and at times an evil man when needed but, Wicked, he’s also a family man. The Cosa Nostra, all though in everyday lives yes, they live above the law, deep down in their roots, they have good morals! They have commandments, rules!” I take a deep breath, looking outside my window. “The only one he always breaks is the one to keep his dick in his pants.”

The silence edges me closer to tipping point, so I hit the radio on again. This time I know the song that filters through the tight space... “Late to the Party” by Joyner Lucas.

“Your father isn’t exactly who you think he is, Ruby.” I don’t bother turning around to look at him. It only makes it more difficult to be distracted by his ridiculously beautiful facial features. Honestly, it’s not fair at all that someone with his extreme asshole-ry is this hot.

“I think I know exactly who my father is, Wicked. You don’t need to tell me. You don’t need to say anything more, and anyway—” I turn back in my chair, finally braving myself to look at him. “I’m more worried about the kind of man you are. Where are you taking me, Wicked? And why?” I didn’t expect him to answer my questions. If being the daughter of the

mafia has taught me anything, it's that women don't know anything. I'm not important enough to be asking questions and he doesn't need to answer them. Something I would die on a mountain to change.

He licks the side of his lip, and I quickly divert my eyes back to the road in front of me. "If I could tell you everything, I would. If I could tell you *anything*, I fucking would."

I blink back the tears that build behind my eyes. "I don't believe you."

"Yeah? Well, I don't fucking care." The sun is in full beam now, and I've lost track of so much time that I don't even notice when he turns the wheel off the road and enters a long dusty path that leads to God knows where.

I spin back around to watch as the road we were just on slowly disappears. Wrapping my arms around my belly, I close my eyes and retrace all of the memories I have of my family. Anything.

"Are they going to kill me?" I ask without opening my eyes. I already know what he's going to say, but I need to ask anyway. Turning to face him one last time, I wait until his eyes connect with mine. "Are you going to kill me?" He doesn't answer, turning the radio off and continuing to drive us off-road. It must go on forever, because by the time we finally pull up to a long wired gate, my ass is numb. I haven't moved.

He shuts off the car and we sit and wait.

"Aren't you going to get out and open my door?" I ask sarcastically, looking out the window beside me. "Or what?" I follow the lines of the tall redwood trees in the distance. "You afraid I'll run you over."

"Look at me, Ruby." I don't. And I have to fight back the large rock lodged in my throat to stop myself from crying. From exposing every single emotion that has been building inside of me since he took me. "Ruby..." That simple word said by lips that whisper lies. I hate him.

His fingers come to the back of my neck and I jolt as electricity shoots down the base of my spine from the connection. He forces me around until I'm looking directly at him. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry." He says the words, but the corner of his lip curls upward.

"No, you're not..." I say, sneering. "You like this."

His brows raise up slightly and his smirk only deepens. "You're right." He forces my head away, reaching for the handle and shoving it open. "I do like it."

I fall from the SUV and land on the dirt, where stones cut into the palms of my hands and blood fills my mouth.

I cough, sucking in deep breaths and rolling to my back. My chest tightens and I look up at the sky from blurry eyes. The sun doesn't bother to hide behind a cloud. It beams down on me, laughing, like I got myself into whatever this situation is. A shadow clouds my face and everything goes black.

My wrists prickle with pain, and I slowly try to twist them around as spasms zap through my head.

Wicked. Pushing me out of the car. Stealing me. *Oh my God.*

My eyes pop open and I shoot to my feet. It's cold. So cold that goose bumps litter my exposed legs. There's a perfectly manicured bush in front of me, and I turn around to see an identical one opposite. Left and right, I'm boxed in by a cube of dense but flawlessly manicured hedges. Dirt mushes between my toes as I make my way to the other end, swiping the blood from the side of my face. I walk around the corner, to where it continues around like a maze. Running to the end, I hit another corner and spin back around to see where I came from. The sun that was rising this morning behind Wicked is now setting in the sky, and the pain around my wrists and head intensifies the farther I walk.

Falling down to the ground, I wrap my arms around my legs, forcing them to my chest and resting my cheek on my knees. Why? Why is this happening, and what did I do to him for him to do this?

Closing my eyes, I rock silently back and forward, counting down from one hundred.

Ninety-nine

Ninety-eight

Ninety-seven

My eyes pop open when I hear a crack from somewhere deep in the maze. Shooting to my feet, I run through the way I came, passing hedge after hedge. I keep running, following an unknown path as my chest burns and my eyes sting with tears. My mind spins around and the hedges that were stationary start merging together to form colors around me. Warped together like a haze of smoke, I trip backward and lose my footing, everything going black.



Wicked

I sit on the bench seat at the front of the chapel, my knee jiggling and the familiar mask clasped in my hand. The half human bone mask is littered with markings, and I trace the indentation of carvings over the years. Line after line cut into it. I lose count toward the end. One. Two. Three. Four. *Strike.* And repeat.

“Hangman...” His voice is like a thread of warning. I knew that one day, I’d drive my knife through his skull. It was just a matter of time and safety. I couldn’t do it with so much to fucking lose all the time. Poppy was always my biggest concern, but now with Ruby? Fuck if I know what I’m doing.

My knee stops, and I keep my eyes locked on the Virgin Mary statue that stands at the altar of the chapel. Her hands are closed around rosary beads before they trail down to an upside-down cross. Blood spills from her eyes, and part of her body is covered in a black cloak. This isn’t about religion, it’s about power.

“She’s not reacting well, as expected.” He takes a seat beside me on the bench and I have to fight with myself to not kill him right now. Finally, my

eyes trail up to his face, to where his suit ends and the rough edges of his jaw begin.

“Mmmhmm.” I roll my lips behind my teeth to stop from doing something animalistic like biting his fucking face off.

Shit. I don’t know what the fuck has gotten into me. I’ve known him all of my life, Poppy’s life. He’s done all kinds of shit to both of us—more than both of us, to many people and kids—and not once had I ever felt this kind of rage. I can feel the violence in my bones humming against every logical thought process inside my head. Like I can almost feel the sharp talons of time scraping down the side of my skull.

“You got what you wanted.” Slowly, I turn my body toward him. “Now where’s Poppy?”

He doesn’t answer, his eyes remaining focused on Mother Mary. His shoulders are squared back, his control unwavering.

“Do you remember when you were a little boy and you tried to run away?”

I bite back a growl, because for once in my life his restraint—his controlled candor—fucking irks me. “How could I forget? That was pretty much when you made me your favorite toy.”

He doesn’t smile, but his cheek twitches and a slight cackle escapes his mouth. “Ha. That’s probably being a little too optimistic, young one.” It wasn’t. I remember every single day I spent with him like it was imprinted into my brain. Someone once told me that the older you got, the less you remembered as a child. It was the reason why we couldn’t remember some memories. It’s a lie. I remember fucking everything.

“What did you want with Ruby?”

Ruby La Rosa has been my subject for a lot longer than she’s known. Both her and her father. The truth is, the people who are after them are a lot worse than their mafia. And by the way I slipped into their family exactly to plan, I’d say that Victor would also know that by now.

“Ahh—” He touches the tip of his nose, finally shifting his body around to look at me.

Skully is not someone you want to make an enemy out of. Everyone knows that. But he is only one of the worst people you could meet. There is another who is just as bad. One who makes my skin itch any time I think about him. Or the fact that he can very well be the reason why Skully wants Ruby. Would I have brought her here if I had known that? I don’t know.

“The famous question...” He pauses, and I hate when he does that. I’ve never seen him raise his voice. Never seen even a flash of anger on his face. Skully is completely void of showing any source of emotion, and for so long I’ve known I wanted to be trained in the way he trained me. Taught how to weaponize my emotions by showing none. Humans hate that. People hate when they want to get under your skin but know that they can’t.

“Just a question...” I edge closer, raising a brow at him. Skully has indented eye sockets so dark that he almost looks malnourished. It’s how he got his name. Skully. People here are known by nicknames. No legal names allowed. Except mine is my legal name.

“One you’re not ready for the answer to.” He claps his hands and stands from the bench, towering over me. I lean back, resting my arms on the edge of the chair. “Ruby La Rosa isn’t your concern anymore, Hangman. She is simply not your concern anymore.” He pats my shoulder and smiles tensely at me before moving through the aisle. I spin back around to see where he has gone when Poppy emerges, her eyes wide as if she’s searching for me.

I shoot up from the bench. “Pop?” She jogs down the aisle, swiping tears from her eyes. Before I can ask what’s wrong, she jumps into my arms and I catch her small body, pulling her into me.

“Len, we have to get Ruby out of there. This is a trap.”

I shake my head, pulling her back by her arms. “No, Poppy. No. For whatever reason she’s here, it’s important.” Poppy doesn’t know the extent of The Familia. I mean, she knows, but from birth I shaded her from a lot of evil that’s happened here, so in a sense she has been able to move through her life here without thinking twice.

“Wicked! They will kill her!” I’ve never seen her the way she is right now. Her cheeks are bright red, the same color as her eye sockets from all of the crying, and her lips are cracked and chapped, like tears have dried like lip balm.

“They won’t.” I straighten my shoulders.

“And how do you know that?” Poppy snaps, shoving out of my arms. “She’s here because of me. Len! We have to get her out of here before they hurt her, or worse—” Her skin pales.

“They won’t, Poppy.” I brush away her loose hair. “I know because I’m going to be her Dragon.”

Poppy stops breathing, her face falling blank. “You can’t.”

“Yes, I can...”

“You—” Poppy shakes her head, stepping backward and away from me like I’ve fucking hurt her. “You can’t do that to her, Wicked!”

“Poppy!” I growl, taking a short tentative step toward her. “Me being her Dragon means we know she doesn’t die.”

“You’re right.” Poppy swipes her cheeks with the backs of her hands. “But it’s going to make her wish that she did.”

Past

Wicked

I never thought much about birthdays. They were celebrated differently here to what I’d heard how they were out in the world. We celebrated them by the date we were burned into The Institution, not the day we were born. So today was my thirteenth birthday by TI, and yeah, I had been here a very fucking long time. Long enough to know that this was the only way I wanted to live. I was going to be the next Skully. I knew it. Everyone fucking knew it. It’s why I was his favorite pet, but today? Today was something different. It was four four four. The day of the half-born Dragon. Today was the day I was going to be forged into the next level of my life.

I pulled the rim of my hoodie up over my head, shading half of my face.

“Are you ready?” Poppy asked from behind me. I turned around to see her. Poppy and I were placed together when we first came in. She was a couple years younger than me, so I was already three or four when she came in, but I instantly felt protective of her. Like she was my own sister. Our bond grew from there. She was the only one I really spoke to in TI who wasn’t Skully. The only one I trusted. I didn’t bother with the others, since half of them ended up buried in the Pitt.

I let her worry, tightening my robe and making sure it didn’t have any crinkles. Behind the old asylum was dense bushland, and then hidden deeper in was a set of glass igloos. No one really knew what he did with them but me. All of us lived in the old asylum. A numbered room each.

Poppy patted my shoulder, moving to my single bed and picking up the blade that lay on a black cushion. My room was basic. Wooden walls, a small sink near the end of my bed, and a toilet hidden behind a curtain at

the back. Beside the bed was my standing closet, where dark robes hung and other casual clothes remained folded at the bottom. I didn't wear other clothes. None of us did. There was a constant smell that clung to the ratty curtains that covered the high windows above my bed, and aside from the shitty plumbing and the squeaky bed, I couldn't be bothered with anything else. I knew that with time, with hard work, I'd move up in the ranks. I'd be able to do more civilian work and help Skully with what he needed.

"Here!" Poppy handed me the blade, and my fingers closed around the base of the knife. "You're going to probably need this a lot more now." There was a silence that split between the two of us, and I knew that Poppy wanted to ask questions, but the truth was, she already knew too much. I had overshared with her too often and I wouldn't do it anymore. "Can you promise me one thing?"

I nodded, even though I knew I wouldn't be able to promise her shit.

"We get out of this?"

A brick wall fell down between us, but I lifted my hand to her chin, circling the tip. "Sure thing, Pop." I pulled her into my lips and kissed the top of her head the way I'd done so many times before. "Sure thing."

Present

Picking up my phone, I shoved it into my back pocket, pausing as I take in my old room. Haven't been back here in years, since I initiated into becoming not just any Dragon, but Skully's Dragon. Because to slay a Dragon, one must become one.

I run my finger over the old tiled sink, where I'd cut myself open on multiple occasions just to feel something. Anything other than the aching feeling of loss. I didn't want to feel anything. I wanted so fucking badly to be just like Skully that I trained my dumb ass self to not feel.

It worked.

Until Ruby La Rosa.

Now I have to be hers.

I pick up the bone mask, throwing my robe over my clothes and sliding the mask over my face. Little Ruby La Rosa doesn't know what the fuck is coming for her, and the worst part about that is... she's going to fucking wish it wasn't me.

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Ruby

Time stands still. I feel elated, as if I am falling through clouds in the sky, and anytime I try to stop myself from falling, my fingers grasp the emptiness of the clouds. I want to go home. I want Mama, Papa, and Betty. I want to go back to when my life was the chaotic mess that it was, but it was a familiar mess. I want to go back to when Wicked was a simple boy who Papa brought home and who just needed a new home.

I know my life can never be that simple. I know that I'll never have the kind of luxury that that can offer me. But I wish for it anyway.

I rest my head back against the hedge, long lost given up my fight to escape this never-ending maze. I'd die fighting as much as I'd die by sitting here. I'd rather die this way than give them the satisfaction of me trying to run.

"That it?" His voice shocks me, and my head whips up to a darkened corner to find him standing in a long black robe that covers the top of his head. If that isn't bad enough, the bone mask that covers his face is. It has scratches over the top, but where the mark-off of five comes, it's done in red. It only covers the top half of his face, leaving his jaw and lips wide open. "Gotta admit, kinda hoped you'd fight harder."

“Fuck you.” I spit on the ground, leaning my head up to the sky, where a full moon beams back down at me. I like the moon more than the sun. The sun resembles happiness, warmth, everything humans fake. The moon symbolizes the cold, the people who like to hide in the shadows.

I’m cold.

So cold.

My teeth chatter, but I keep the hoodie clinging to my body. “Whatever it is you want from me, you’ll have to kill me to get it.”

He pushes from the hedge, and just when I think he’s not going to say anything, and when I’ve found myself lost on the steel tip of his boots, he lowers down to face me. “Trust me, that can be arranged, but for now—” He grabs me from around the collar, forcing me to my feet. “Find your way out of here.”

“Why!” I scream, balling my fists on the sides of my body. “Why should I do any-fucking-thing you say?” His mask is interesting. I’m annoyed at how often I find myself tracing the curve of his lips. “Why should I—” His hand is around the front of my throat, forcing me backward against the hedge.

He tilts his head and my mouth slams closed. “Because if you ever want to see your papa again, you’re going to do exactly as you’re told—” He squeezes again, forcing me harder against the bush. “Because if you don’t, Ruby? I’ll kill you like I have the other three hundred and however many marks are indented into this skull.” My blood turns cold as I trace every line with new eyes. Literally. “So you’re going to do as you’re fucking told.”

“No—” I bite out. “I’m not.” His hands fly beneath my thighs and he lifts me off the ground. He knew that if I didn’t wrap my legs around his waist that I’d be left hanging by his hand around my throat. Fuck.

“You will.” His lips touch mine and heat rushes to the surface. “Or I’ll make it hurt enough until you do.” He smirks over my mouth. “Go on—” He kisses me like he did that night. “Fight me.”

I force my lips closed, moving my head away from him when he brushes his hand over my underwear. I try not to give in, but my breathing turns heated.

“You gonna stop me?” He presses his thumb against my clit. “Because I wouldn’t.”

His other hand moves to cover my mouth and he splits my legs wider as he moves my panties to the side, his finger dipping inside my pussy. I

squeeze around him, unable to hold in my restraint.

“Look at me, and I won’t drug you to do this.” I don’t. I keep my eyes locked on the leaves that grow out of the hedge.

He forces my face to his, and my heart snaps in my chest when I come face-to-face with the monster he has been all along. “Ride me.” Do I do it? It wouldn’t be giving in if I did. It would simply be me taking charge.

I roll my hips forward as his lips crash onto mine. He opens up his robe and unfastens his belt buckle, pulling his pants down as he bites against my chin.

“This is gonna hurt...” He forces my body onto his hard cock and I yelp out a scream, my nails digging into his shoulder blades. He pushes into me, kissing my lips. “Sorry, baby...” Something pinches my arm, and my eyes fly to his, wide as the colors mix together like a watercolor painting.

He drops me back to the ground and I dust off his feeling from my body. Just as I take another step, I lose my footing and my mind turns fuzzy. A loud siren noise pierces through the air, and I chuckle manically. “Oh, what’s that mean?”

Wicked pauses, his head moving to the side when his eyes narrow on a spot in the corner of the hedge. “Fuck.”

“What is it?” I joke, rolling my eyes. “Someone escape? Lucky them!”

He grabs me by my wrist and starts dragging me down the tight turns and pathways. Five minutes later, I see the end of the tunnel. Grass sprawls out around our feet as he continues toward the opening. I widen my eyes to stop them from smudging when I see the township ahead. Little cabins are built around each other, where a large run-down building sits. It looks like an abandoned hospital.

“What is this place?” I let him drag me down the grassy mountain and toward the cabins.

“Somewhere you don’t want to be.” He tightens his grip around my wrist, but I try to force myself out of it. Finally, he spins around, his eyes wild on me. “Fucking move, Ruby. I don’t have fucking time for this shit.”

“What!” I yell. “You don’t have time to fucking kidnap me? Drug me? Fuck me while drugging me? Are you kidding?” The piercing siren gets louder as we get closer to the cabins.

He hisses, grabbing the mask and tearing it off his face. It’s then that I see the disarray of his hair and the panic in his eyes. “It’s fucking Poppy! That siren?” He points down toward the asylum and goose bumps break

over my skin. “Only goes off when someone in The Institution is dead—so can you fucking move so I can make sure it’s not my sister.”

“Wait a minute—” I wave my hand in front of my face. “Are you telling me that she helped you kidnap me?”

“The fuck?” Wicked’s brows dip inward. “Where did I say that? Those drugs got you fucked up. No! I brought you here because it was part of my duty. Because if I fucking didn’t? He would kill Poppy!”

“And these are your friends?” I scrunch up my face, but the horror is sprawled out over it. I’ve never been good at hiding that.

“Friends?” Wicked laughs violently, his head tilting back. And even though it was done sarcastically, seeing his straight white teeth and the two dimples on either side of his cheeks almost slaps me on my ass.

Wow. I never want to see that fucking smile again. Evil bastard.

“I have no friends here, Ruby. This is a lifestyle, the only kind Poppy and I have known. The kind that gets you killed if you don’t obey the rules.” He grabs me by the hand again and starts dragging me back down the mountain. I don’t fight this time because I know. I know deep down beneath all of that ugliness he’s showing, that the Wicked I know is real, and this one? This one is something else. “I told her we couldn’t save you. She lost her shit and took off crying. She’s all over the place right now. I’ve hidden a lot from her over the years, and I have a feeling someone with loose fucking lips here has gone out of their way to tell her.”

“Why?” I ask, even though I have no idea what the fuck he’s talking about, but if Poppy is in danger, I want to make sure she has my help, and to help her, I need to know whatever bullshit he’s talking about. Even if I can’t walk without his assistance right now. The drugs are starting to wear off as seconds pass, but whatever it was, felt familiar. “Why would you need to hide things from her in a place you both lived for so long?”

The blades of grass whip my ankles as we finally get to the bottom of the mountain and he spins around to face me. “Because this life wasn’t one we chose. It was one we were thrown into.”

Doors slam closed in the distance, and I whip my head up to see windows shutting and blinds closing. The wind whistles around me and I shiver as I watch the tree branches behind the asylum bend with the wind.

“What’s happening?” I ask through chattering teeth, watching as door by door, window by window, close and cover. That isn’t the warning sign, though. It is the silence. The mere silence. There’s a built wooden

playground to the back of the little cabins, where sandcastles are half made. A chicken coop behind that, and beside the coop is a wooden gate where goats stroll aimlessly around the little paddock.

Wicked backs up on me, reaching for my hand. “We’ve got to run...”

“What?” I ask, looking over his shoulder. “What is it?”

Crows squawk from the trees behind the cabins as Wicked continues to back up on me. Only this time, instead of yanking me toward him by my wrist, his fingers intertwine with mine. “We’ve got to run...” he repeats.

Fire breaks through the tree clearing and bright ember flecks dance up in the sky as the sun sets in the distance.

“Wicked...” I tense his fingers with mine. I should be angry with him. I am angry with him. But right now, I know that whatever is happening is out of his control. Is he going to hurt me while I’m in the maze? Yes. Most likely.

My head pounds as I fall backward and the trees in the distance start to bleed into the bright orange embers. “Wic—” I rest my hand on my forehead, closing my eyes. My brain turns to static as blood rushes to my head.

“Hey!” Wicked catches me with his arm. “Fuck.”

“What’s going on?” Sweat pools down the side of my head. He scoops me up and carries me toward the back of one of the little houses. He comes in clearer now, but the piercing vibrations inside my head are almost too much to handle.

“Look at me. You’re coming down from the drugs I gave you.”

“Such a fucking gentleman...” I push off him, swiping the dust off my clothes.

“Listen to me!” His hand covers my mouth, his body towering over me. “I brought you here because it was my job to do that. If I don’t do my job? Poppy dies. Now—” He peeks around the corner of the house but keeps his hand covering my mouth. Wood scrapes against my back but my breathing calms at the proximity of his body against mine. He comes back to me. “Something is wrong with Poppy. Do I need to lock you away somewhere so I can find her, or are you good?”

I nod and he slowly releases his hand from around my mouth. “Good.”

“Wait—” My hand goes to his arm again. “Why don’t you just kill me?”

“I still might,” he growls, grabbing my hand and yanking me behind another cabin. Soft mumbles start drifting through the space, and Wicked’s

finger presses against my lips.

I stare up at him. “What?” I mouth, only my lips press against his fingers.

He leans down, resting his forehead against mine, his eyes closed. “They killed her.”

I pause. My blood turns cold as I bring my hand to his cheek. “What? Who did? Who killed who?”

He grips me by the throat, forcing my eyes onto his. There’s no anger, no sadness, no—emotion. Void empty pits of nothing stare back at me. “You need to run. Now. And don’t look back.”

“Wicked—” He tightens his grip around my throat.

“You need to *run* because if I don’t kill you, *they sure as fuck will.*” I blink back the tears but my hands fall to the side.

“I’m not going anywhere—” A dark shadow falls over his face, but before he can open his mouth to say anything else, the chanting gets louder, and I can almost feel the flames against my face.

“Well, isn’t this unfortunate...” Another voice comes from behind Wicked’s body, and he freezes. His whole body turns to stone, but he shifts closer to me. Whether it was on purpose or coincidental, I notice it.

Slowly, he turns around, his back now against my face. “What have you done?”

I start to shift to the side, wanting to know who it is that’s behind whatever weird shit happens here, but Wicked moves faster, blocking my view.

“You know the rules, Hangman. You broke them anyway...”

He steps forward, but my hand flies out to his, urging him back. I don’t know why I did it. It makes no sense. I hate this man. He would have *killed* me. Yet something deep inside wants to protect him anyway.

He stops. “What. Did. You. Do.”

There’s a long stretch of silence, and when I finally manage to see around Wicked’s body, my eyes collide with an older man dressed in a suit covered in a robe. He wears a similar mask to Wicked, only not bone. He has dark hair slicked back, a shadow of a beard. He’s big. Bigger than Wicked even. There’s a small diamond tattoo on his chest, where his suit is unbuttoned, and when I travel back to his eyes, dread fills my blood when I see he’s already looking at me.

Wicked shoves me farther behind his back. “I did everything Skully wanted me to do. For years. I obeyed...”

“Tsk, tsk...” The man’s loafers come into view. He moves closer. There are other men surrounding him too, and I swear the chanting is so close that the people who are doing it have to be within view. “You’re mine now, and your little Poppy? Well... unfortunately—” He steps to the side and everything happens at once. Wicked’s body falls to the ground slowly until his knees hit the dirt, and what he just saw is staring back at me, exposed. An upside-down cross has flames burning around the ankles of a half-crisp corpse. Her head is tilted to the side, her face torn off. The flesh on her face has been peeled back—or melted back—to the skeletal remains, as the angry flames of the fire ignite the rest of her body, ripping through the clothes I last saw her wearing from the party.

Wicked screams a roar loud enough to cause a ripple effect throughout the village, and I drop down beside him, my hand on his shoulder to pull him closer into me.

“Pick them both up—” the man with the diamond tattoo says, and I look up at him from below. “They’re mine now.”

One of the men leans down to grab both Wicked and me, but I rear my foot out and kick him straight in the dick. Wicked launches forward, pulling his knife out from his jacket and whipping it across the man who is closest to me. The man stops, his eyes wide and his hands flying to his neck where blood spills between his fingers in a gush of urgency.

I stand back and stare blankly as I watch the life drift from his eyes.

Good. I wish I could say I felt remorse, or even sick to my stomach. I don’t. They killed Poppy, and now they want us.

“Wicked!” I yell, just as arms squeeze around my body. He spins around to find me, just as someone comes in from behind him and everything goes black.

I don’t think I’ve ever thought about the way it feels to be loved. Not just by your parents, but by people who aren’t programmed to love you. That unconditional love. The kind that has nothing to do with the fact that you share the same blood. I’ve never had that. Except for maybe Betty, but not the kind that Wicked and Poppy had. I always assumed that they were blood siblings—they were that close.

I sit perched on a king-size bed. It has black silk sheets and a fur bed cover. There's gold trimmings and architraves that are carved into small patterns on the ceiling, and if I squint my eyes tight enough, I can see the carvings that are cut into the light fixture hanging in the middle. The chandelier style crystals dangle from above, and when I truly take in the room, the opulence of it all sneaks up on me. Everything is black—the bedding, dressers, and even the rug that sits at the end of the bed. There's one door to the side of the room, and behind the bed there's a simple blank wall. No windows. Probably a red flag if I didn't already know that why I'm here *is* a red flag.

Wicked.

I push up from the bed and lift my foot to walk, when I look down to the chunky heels on my feet. What? Moving to the side of the room, where a large Victorian-style mirror hangs off the wall, I pause when I see what I'm wearing. There's a bruise on the side of my head, and when I turn to the side a little, I wince when I see the stitching. *Poppy*. I'm dressed in a black lace bra and black panties with suspenders hanging down my thighs. Pulling the silk robe closer to my body, I tie it around me and turn back to the task at hand.

I need to find Wicked. Whatever has happened with Poppy has to be killing him. An overwhelming feeling of protectiveness washes over me for him. For both of them.

I rush for the door when it flies open before I can reach it, and Wicked is standing at the threshold, dressed in black jeans and a white shirt. His lip is split and his face void of any emotion.

“What—”

His eyes trail down my body, and despite where we are right now, I blush when he settles back on my face. “You're leaving.”

“What is this place? Wicked, this—your world!” I whisper-yell, and he steps in closer, kicking the door closed. “It is crazy! What the fu—”

He grabs me by the cheek, pulling my face into his. His lips find mine and I bring my arm up to the back of his neck. I don't think his intention was to kiss me, but I kiss him anyway. Flicking my tongue over his bottom lip and over the graze, I lean up on my tippy toes, massaging the back of his head. “We can get out together.”

He shakes his head slowly, but his other arm hooks to my back, holding me in place. “This is different, Rubs. This is beyond me, and hell... even

beyond Skully. Wherever the fuck he has disappeared to. This?" He brushes the tip of his nose against mine. "This is beyond even the Honored Society." His hand falls to the nape of my neck. "You need to get out. Tonight. Because what he has planned for you is worse than you can even imagine."

"But what will he do to you if he finds out?" Panic cripples my legs and I fall slightly, only he catches me, carrying me onto the bed. "What is this place?"

"It's The Compound of K Diamond. Look at me—" He forces my face up to his as he slowly lowers himself down beside me. "They're going to kill me. That's inevitable. But I need you to give this to your old man when you get home. Don't read it either, just give it to him." An envelope is placed into my hands, but I don't want to take my eyes off Wicked to see, because this might—tears fall from the corners of my eyes.

He brushes the tears away. "You need to move on and forget about me and all this. I promise you it'll make sense one day. Why I was there, why I came into your life, and why I'm doing what I'm doing now—"

Anger rips through the swell in my throat. "And what is that? Huh? *Hangman*. What are you doing right now, and why can't you come with me?" I stab my finger into his chest, the tears spilling over my cheeks now. "We can both leave."

"No, baby. No, we can't." His warm lips come to mine and my heart shatters. All of the emotions that have barreled into me since Wicked came into my life crash down the final walls of control I have. I don't want him to go. He feels like home. His tongue slips between my lips and I shuffle closer into him as his hands come to the back of my ass, lifting me up to straddle his lap. I grind over the thick bulge in his jeans as he wraps my—washed—hair around his wrist, forcing my face still. He kisses me down, over my jaw and across my collarbone. My fingers fumble with the tie around my waist as the silk robe drops to the floor near his dirty boots.

He leans back onto his elbows, flicking the edge of his bottom lip with the tip of his thumb. "Gonna make it look cute one last time?"

Even with tears rolling down my cheeks, I'll still be whatever he wants me to be.

Leaning over, I unclasp my bra until my tits fall out of the cups. Dropping it to the ground, I stand up and slowly shuffle the lace panties down my thighs, lowering myself down on top of him. I bring the panties to his wrists, tying them around each one and shoving his arms over his head.

He laughs, the first time I've seen a genuine smile on his face. I don't want to bring up Poppy, and maybe this is just how he copes with it—everyone mourns differently—but I falter for a second, wondering if I should have asked if he was okay before stripping naked for him.

Shuffling his jeans down, I ride myself over his girth until I feel the tip of his cock pulse against my entrance. I release a slight breath, leaning down and kissing his lips. "I'll stay with you."

He shakes his head. "No, you won't." Then I slide him deep inside of me and watch as his eyes roll to the back of his head and his teeth sink into his bottom lip.

I didn't ask where I was.

If he was okay.

Or even why I was dressed in clothes that I wouldn't wear...

I just stripped and dropped down onto his dick.

Lifting my hips up, I slowly ride myself over his length, grinding against him when I feel him pulse against me. "Come here..." He nudges his head, untwisting his wrists from my amateur tie around them before slipping my panties over his head like a necklace. He leans back, his hands resting on my ass cheeks and forcing me back down onto him until I stop just above his lips. He slowly raises his hips up. "Ride me."

Moving to the other side of the room, his jeans unbuttoned and around his waist, he pulls open a drawer and takes out his hoodie that I was wearing. Tossing it onto my lap, he points. "Get changed. I'm taking you to the airport. Victor will have men waiting for you there."

I slip my arms through, then force my head through. "What about you? And why do I get to leave and you don't?"

"Because I just don't, Ruby." He steps closer to me, wrapping his fingers around my chin. "Sorry..."

I search his eyes. "For what?"

Clapping sounds out behind Wicked, and I tilt my head to see who it is. The same man with the diamond tattoo enters, leaning on the dresser. "Bravo, you two. That will make a splendid video."

I pause. "What?"

Wicked steps backward, shaking his head. "Bye, baby girl."

The man twirls his fingers and two other men enter. He clicks his fingers. "Drop her off at the airport. I'll keep my end of the deal." Betrayal

claws its ugly talons into my skin as I watch Wicked walk down the long corridor. Every step he takes, I feel my heart beat in my chest slower. Heavier.

Angrier.

When love grows where hate was planted, you don't get flowers. Just thorns.

I hate him.

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Wicked

I don't stop walking until I'm out of his bullshit mansion and walking down the path that leads to the Pens. It's where I deserve to be, that's a given, and I'd rather take myself there than stay inside and listen to Ruby scream and fight her way out. She'll no doubt hate me for the rest of her life, as she should.

I can't find myself to care.

I stop just as the forest clearing opens up to the igloo-shaped pods that are scattered around the forest, hidden behind trees and broken branches. Five of them are spaced out around the ground, with each being completely transparent and open. For anyone to see, watch, or do whatever it is they want to do.

I rest against the glass one nearest to the opening, banging my head against the wall. Losing her hasn't settled in yet. I don't think it ever will, but I know I don't have time to mourn, because now, I have to figure out a way to kill every single person who played a part in Poppy's death. I hated fucking doing that video, but I know it's for her own good. *He won't want her without it.* I know that it's not the civilians of The Institute. They're simply there because they have nowhere else to go, but little do they know

the dark underbelly of the person they call God and what he does—or has his Dragons do—to keep shit running afloat.

“That one is yours—” Diamond points to the igloo I’m leaning on. “You will stay here until I deem you worthy of leaving.” Diamond and Skully are brothers, but not blood. They’re like a ridiculous duo. I didn’t have much to do with Diamond growing up, but I had heard stories of him through TI. None of them great. He leads a normal life in the outside world apparently, a life where his family and kids have no idea the kind of dirty shit he does over here, or in his compound. The robes represent him and Skully. The white robes are for Skully, the black for Diamond. No one but me knows that. It’s Skully’s way of trying to make him feel like he is a decent person beneath it all. I think he really thinks he is... but he is also delusional, so there is that.

“And when will that be?” I keep my eyes locked on his as he moves around me, reaching into his pocket for a chain of keys. He pushes one into a keyhole and unlocks it.

“When I tell you you’re free.” He widens the door, gesturing inside.

“You’re not going to let me out of this fucking thing, are you?” Crows clap their wings up above, the wind whistling between the branches that hang ahead.

He shakes his head slowly. “No. But don’t worry.” He leans down, entering into the pod and gesturing to the space. “You have everything you need in here.” I follow his footsteps, ducking beneath the space and standing straight once I’m inside. There’s a double bed pushed up against the side, a small rug on the floor, and a bathroom to the other side. Everything somehow screams *I have money*, yet this is what he chooses to do with it.

I swallow past the anger of having him inside such a small space. Fighting the urge to not wrap my fingers around his neck and watch as his life bleeds from his eyes.

His mouth twitches. “If it’s any consolation, I had nothing to do with dear Poppy’s death...” Liar. He had everything to do with her. I wince at the mention of her name, and before I can gather my thoughts again, he’s slammed the door closed and locked me inside.

Silence. Nothing. But silence.

He dangles the keys in front of him and I launch forward, banging on the glass, only it echoes with silence. A Cheshire Cat smile spreads over his

face as he wiggles his finger in front of me. “No, no! Don’t worry.” He tilts his head. “I’m going to bring some friends in here for you by the end of the week.”

I watch as he disappears the same way I came through. I know that he won’t hurt Ruby and he’ll keep his word, not because of the promise he made me, but because he always has an ulterior motive. As much as he will try to deny it. Both of the brothers like to think they’re above everything and everyone. Even the fucking mafia.

I fall onto the bed and look around the room. Beside the toilet and basin there’s a low line dresser.

Running my hand through my hair, I pull my phone out of my pocket and see its battery is at one percent. The last, last percent.

I open a text to Ruby.

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Wicked

I trace the red indented cuts on my wrist, feeling nothing but numbness as I drag my thumbnail across the sharp edges of each cut. A slice for every day I have been here. I count. *One. Two. Three.* Lost track at twelve. It has been weeks since I have last seen her. Since I have last seen or spoken with anyone. Clothes come in daily, with some bullshit excuse for food.

I press the edge of the razor into a bare spot on my wrist, watching as blood spills over my skin. Closing my eyes, I exhale a sigh of relief when the cut splits open for my last day.

Resting my head against the glass wall, I stare up at the sky, watching the stars. One for each fucking problem. For each problem I no longer care about. Dropping the razor onto the ground, I push up from the ground. Another day where I don't hit a vein. Deep down I know that I am playing Russian roulette. But I also know that I want it. I want to feel the coolness of death take over my body as I slowly bleed out onto the floor.

I slam the cupboard closed above the kitchen sink, just as I hear clicking of keys. Spinning around, I pause when I see K Diamond in front, guards on either side and behind him, but it is what is behind K Diamond that makes me stop.

Three guys, blindfolded and bleeding, stand. They look confused from where I am standing, but not one of them seems to be crying, or showing any form of emotion.

I shuffle to the side and watch carefully as K Diamond steps aside, yanking the boys into my den.

He pushes a little device that's up near his mouth, his eyes on mine. "Wicked, you will have new housemates. Be nice... or not." He shuffles behind the three of them, and before I can find the will to fight my way out, he's gone. Disappeared back through the way he came.

I snatch the razor from the sink and move to the first one I see, cutting the ties that are around his wrists. He tears off his blindfold, uncovering his face. He's gotta be around the same age as me.

"What the fuck is happening?"

"Not sure where to begin." I finish cutting the rest of the guys loose, tossing the razor into the sink.

He nudges his head down to mine, where blood drips to the ground. "You good?"

"No." I grab a roll of tissue paper from the bench, wrapping it around my wrist.

"What the fuck, man!" another one says, looking around the already small space. Now with all of them in here, it's even worse, and something tells me that K Diamond is going to do everything in his power to fucking break all of us. That what he's done leading up to this point is nothing. He is about to remove my training wheels.

"You taken too?" the first guy asks, and I get the feeling he's the leader of the pack.

"Yeah." I lean against the counter. "How did you three end up here?" Whatever K Diamond did, he did it for a reason. And deep down, I know that his beef isn't with me, and me being here has more to do with Skully than it does him. Skully is just hiding behind his uglier brother in hopes that I never get out and tear his fucking throat out. K Diamond is keeping me for his own selfish needs, and probably to use as a weapon against Skully if he needs.

"Needed to save my foster sister. This motherfucker was going to hurt her. We did what he asked, but I should have fucking known better."

"Hmm." I won't ride him too hard about what he's done. I did the same fucking thing for Ruby.

“What about you?” one of the other guys asks. He’s big. Darker colored skin, bright eyes, and talks with enough confidence that you probably wouldn’t cross him. Probably. I still would.

“Long story, similar.”

Before the other nerdy one can talk, a cackle sounds out and my eyes fly up to the little red dot flashing in the corner. I make sure to flip it off every fucking day.

I jerk my middle finger up at it again.

“Always such a pleasure, Wicked. Now—” Interesting that he’s using some weird as fuck device to hide his identity now. Which means... one of these fuckers knows him personally. Which one is it, I wonder. I darken my eyes on the camera lens, a smirk teasing my lips. *I fucking know you’ve got a secret, you bald-headed fuck.*

A long pause stretches out, as if he’s watching my reaction and is understanding what I’m saying. Do I want to get out of here? Unsure. Do I think I would still be alive to even contemplate my life? Fuck no.

“As I was saying...” he continues. “You’re all going to get acquainted with one another over the next—however long I decide to keep you in here for—”

“Hold up!” I step forward, closer to the camera. “Are you telling me you’re keeping us *all* in this little ass fucking room? For what?”

“Wicked...” He’s annoyingly calm and calculated. Much like his psychotic brother. “Yes, I am. During your time here, you will perform jobs during the day. One act a day.” I pause. I know Skully well. Too well. But I don’t know shit about K Diamond. “If you don’t, we will kill those closest to you, and you can taste test who is who during supper.”

I flip the camera off again. “You already killed the one person you could use as leverage against me, fucker!”

A loud cackle breaks through the silence. It goes on for what feels like hours before he finally says, “But did I? And let’s not forget, truly, you have *two*.” He’s bluffing. There is no way that he would risk a war with the Cosa Nostra for Ruby, even though to this day... I still don’t know why they wanted her to begin with, all to what? Give her back to her father? Years of training for a couple of months and to give her back? Maybe things had changed somewhere along the way that I couldn’t see right now. I know for a fact that he won’t fuck with La Rosa, and if by chance he is dumb enough

to do that? I'd bet my life that that girl would be chained up in her house with the highest paid security on her ass. Even Victor won't want that...

"You're full of shit..." I snap, baring my teeth. I'm getting real sick and tired of having a conversation with him through a fucking camera lens, where I can't see his reaction or thoughts.

"Am I? There will be a delivery left in your meals tonight. I suggest all of you look through them and then decide if I am, in fact, bluffing." The scratchy sound silences and it's just us again.

"What's your name?" the main guy asks, coming toward me. The other two stay on the bed, a mixture of shock and anger filling their faces.

I grab a cigar out of the box on the counter, offering him one. He takes it and we both stay silent, rolling mine between my fingers. I could give him a fake name, but a dark part of me doesn't want to.

I bite down on the end of the cigar, lighting the Zippo. I puff on the trunk until it gathers enough burn, before flicking tobacco out of my mouth. "Wicked. You?"

When he doesn't answer, I turn my head to look at him and find him staring back at me with green eyes. The fucker is sure as hell pretty. The corner of his mouth curves in a knowing smirk. "Sicko."

"Cheers." I tap my cigar against his before bringing it back to my mouth. "To new fucked-up beginnings..."

"Yo, Roy, are we going to talk about this? Like we *did* what he fucking said we were supposed to do!"

I watch as he moves across the room, taking a seat beside his friends. "I know, but clearly, something happened along the way."

Sucking down the smoke, I point to them with the end. "I don't know much about K Diamond. I more fuck with his idiot brother Skully."

Sicko pauses, looking up at me from behind the cloud of smoke. "This psycho has a fucking brother?"

Pushing off the counter, I move to the door. "Yeah. He's not as bad as K Diamond, but I'm starting to rethink my choice of thoughts."

"He take something from you?" It's an honest question. I know that whoever this group of guys are and whatever they're doing here, they're good people. Not the kind I was raised around. Not the kind I am.

"K Diamond?" I shake my head. "Nah. But Skully? Fucking definitely." K Diamond had nothing to do with Poppy. I know that deep down, but was he bluffing about her being alive? A big part of me wanted to believe he

was telling the truth, but I gave up fifty days ago. I haven't really given a fuck about much else since.

"You wanna get out, brother?" Sicko asks, and I slowly shift my head over my shoulder, my eyes resting on his.

"Nah, but I'll help you lot get out."

"You don't want to get out of here?" the nerdy one sitting on the edge of the bed asks, staring at me with wide eyes. Probably not a very fair assessment. He may not be that nerdy at all, and once upon a time, I called Ruby nerdy, and that little freak crawled her way onto my lap naked the first chance she got. I'm a shit judge of character—clearly.

"I don't care enough to do it. It's not about want. I don't know what I want."

His brows cross together, but the guy beside him, I think Sicko called him Orson, shakes his head. Before any of us can say anything else, someone emerges from the forest, wearing a dark robe. The hairs on the back of my head stand straight. She's small. I can tell she's a girl from the short space of her shoulders. Everything dies out behind me, and when she finally comes close enough for me to see the outline of her face, I stop breathing.

"Poppy?"

She keeps the robe over her head and I bang on the glass with my fist. Leaning down to where the food is slid into, she points down with her head. I open the flap and grab the tray, sliding it inside.

"Lenny, he's going to kill me. You have to get us out."

"I will, Pop. Stay strong." I slide the tray in, tossing it to the back where Sicko is, and watch as she runs her way back through the clearing.

"Fuck!" I bang my fist against the glass. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" She has been alive this whole time and I am in this fucking hellhole rotting.

Storm hasn't moved from his area on the bed, and Orson has started walking back and forward in the small space, constantly. It has been three days since K Diamond threw them in here with me, and none of us have been fed. It is a warfare of epic proportions, only we don't know what weapons we need to use.

"I don't get it..." Royce runs his hand over his face. "I did what he asked me to do, and what the fuck even is this place? None of this shit makes sense." He stares off blankly, and I watch as emotions fall over his

face. From confusion, to anger, to sadness, and repeat. “He wants me away, then I’ll do it.”

“We’ve got to get out of here.”

“How?” Orson asks, finally stopping his walking and staring blankly back at me. “How the fuck do we do that when we don’t even know what he wants?”

“That’s the problem, though. I do know what he wants...” I murmur, sinking the sharp corner of the razor into my wrist. None of them have said a word when I do it. As though they let me have this moment. I respect that. “He wants our compliance. With Skully, it was always about compliance. They’re brothers, they have to want the same.”

“So you’re not here because of K Diamond? You’re here for his brother?”

I toss the razor up and into the sink, watching as the blood drips from my wrist. “Correct.” My eyes shift to the camera, and I raise my brows. “Then come on. Let’s play...”

Before any of them can say anything, the speaker breaks in, as if he has been sitting behind the computer, watching us for days on end. He probably has.

“Your task for today, and if you skip, your first day will reset and you will be here longer.”

“How long are we in here for?” Royce asks, stepping closer to the camera. He jerks his finger up at it. “How many days?”

Silence. A deep chuckle rips through. “That’s not for you to know right now.”

Royce sinks into the bed as the final emotion washes over his face. Defeat.

“I want a show.” His voice is laden with a fake sense of power. Something he thinks he has but doesn’t. “I want all four of you to give me that. Let’s see how much you can all follow instructions, and just maybe—maybe I’ll let you eat tonight.” I swallow back the chuckle that threatens up my throat. There were whispers around TI about how Skully’s brother was worse than him. How he was the darker of the duo who bared nothing but evil. Skully is fucked up in himself, so the thought that there’s an even worse twin is almost too depressing to think about.

“Wicked, I want you and Royce together.”

Our eyes collide. “Together?”

Royce steps backward until his back hits the glass wall. “Together?”

“Hold up!” Storm stands from the bed, his hands high. “What the fuck is this? You can’t do this.” My eyes weaken as the room starts to tip sideways. I try to open them wider, desperate to gain clarity, but the colors of the room all mix together. Sweat drips down my forehead and my throat tightens. I reach for it, needing to rip it open to get oxygen in again.

I can’t breathe. I can’t see.

“What was that, Storm? I can’t do *what* exactly?” K Diamond says, and I fall sideways to the ground, my hand holding my throat as it closes in around me. “Because I can do whatever I want.” Slowly I feel my throat open up, and see the trees above the igloo, gaining clarity again. The skies open up and the sun stares down at me, pelting against my hot skin. “Now, Royce and Wicked? I want to see you both.” I crawl up the wall, pushing off the floor by the palms of my hands and wiping away the sweat that has fallen down the crack of my back.

Royce stumbles closer to me as I lift myself from the ground.

“For the record,” I say, flicking his forehead. “I’m not gay, but my dick is gonna like what it’s gonna like.”

“Ditto.” Royce swipes his mouth with the back of his hand. I can hear K Diamond yap off more commands in the background, but I don’t care. I just want all this bullshit over with so I can get the fuck out. Get out of this hell and get back to Poppy.

“Ah, I see you’re all going to be difficult.” The voice cuts out and my eyes shift to the door. I should know better than to question any of them, but I do anyway. I want to push back against someone who has taken so much from me already—even if he’s not here to take ownership of what he has done.

Four figures emerge from the forest up ahead, and I lean against the door and watch as they get closer and closer. One is holding a bag, the other a long weapon.

“I’m just going to go ahead and say that I probably should have told you earlier... These men are not like the men you are used to. They’re not wired the way most people are.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Storm snaps, turning back to face me. It’s amusing that even though he has been taken and shoved into a weird little fucking cube with a guy who cuts himself to keep track of how many

days he has been there isn't enough for his bratty behavior to simmer the fuck down.

"Well..." I reach for my cigar box, taking out a fat trunk and clipping the end. I roll it between my lips, resting my tongue against the harsh tobacco and watching as they finally reach the door. "Don't say I didn't warn you all."

Royce shifts, his shoulders arching back. He's a fighter. Picked it the second he was put in here, but that doesn't change shit. What K Diamond wants, he gets, and right now he's the one holding all the power. I'm all about fighting back, but I'm not a dumb motherfucker. I can see when that just isn't going to happen.

The door unlocks and the first man in line enters, swirling the whip around his body. He's wearing a black ski mask and a black jacket and pants. I don't know who the fuck he is, and I couldn't give a fuck either.

"Down!" he yells, and when Strom tries to defy him, the man slashes the whip across his face, smacking him to the ground. "I said... down." Strom clutches his cheek but slowly lowers himself to the floor in front of him, as Orson follows suit.

I blow out a puff of smoke. "You don't have to tell me twice..." I grab Royce from around the belt hinges of his jeans, tugging him backward until his ass hits my cock. I know they won't physically touch me. Skully knows that pain doesn't affect me the same way it does normal people. It's hurting the people I care about that leaves marks on my skin. The kind I don't love to feel. I've used pain as a way to feel for as long as I can remember, and when you're hurting a fucker like me, that is only foreplay.

Royce's arm twitches, but he slowly removes his shirt from behind his neck, tossing it into the corner. He still hasn't turned around to face me, probably worried one of his buddies is gonna get whacked. Which they will. Within five seconds of the three of them being in here, I knew this was about Royce and not about the other two. They're merely collateral damage.

"Ah, Wicked. How you never seem to disappoint me," K Diamond says from the group. "Well go on then. Continue..."

It is the sixteenth day since all three of them have been in here with me. We've gone through every day like fucking robots, doing whatever he wants. After that first time, everything else has followed suit. We do what he wants, play the games he wants to play, but I know. I know the shit we

are doing in here isn't for K Diamond; he is simply the enforcer. With me, anyway. Over the past sixteen days, I feel like whatever bullshit is going on between him and Royce is personal. The jabs toward him and the punishments that sometimes only apply to him are obvious. I still don't know what the game is here, other than K Diamond having beef with Royce. I have yet to see Skully or see what the fuck has happened and why the fuck I'm in here. His day will come. He can't run for fucking ever.

Dried blood crusts over my arms, and I watch as Royce leans into the little hole in the door, grabbing the tray of food. He slides it across the floor to me as they all dig in.

"Tastes like chicken, but—different." Orson sinks his teeth into the brown-colored meat, and I watch as he sucks the juice from the bones.

"I'd say more pork." Storm examines the meat. "Is it weird that this is the first meat serving we've had? I mean, every other meal has just been eggs and rice or potatoes. Now he gives us meat?"

I pick up the weird shaped bone and bite into the meat. He's right. It tastes like pork, only with the texture of chicken. I block out their conversation as my stomach rumbles. Being deprived of meat for the entire time has been rough. More than rough. If I have to break us out of here, I can't do it. I don't feel strong enough, nor do I have the energy needed to. It's why I've given up for now. We've all kept up our training in the small space, using weird things to help. Mainly press-ups and sit-ups because that's all we can do. Orson mentioned breaking our sink and using it as weights. Told him it still wouldn't be heavy enough for the kind of iron I needed to lift.

I sit back, resting my hand on my belly and turning over my shoulder. The whole time that we have been here I haven't seen any of the other igloos being used. Not one. I wonder if he ever uses them at the same time or if he does it one by one.

The door unlocks automatically, a resounding clink unlatching.

"Royce, Storm, and Orson, you may exit the pod." I stand to my feet and rush toward them.

"Wicked... you're not quite done. I need your... expertise. You owe me."

I turn back to the camera, glaring at the little light that flashes. "I've done everything you wanted!"

“Correction—” K Diamond answers, only this time it comes from the opened door. He’s always walking around with guards because he knows. The motherfucker knows that if given even a second, I’ll have him choked out and eating out of a straw for the rest of his life—if I decide to give him his life. “You’ve done everything Skully wanted. This next phase is for me.”

“And if I say no?” I ask, taking careful steps closer to the door. I push through Orson and Storm, fighting the twitching of my fingers. “Let me guess, you’ll hurt Poppy.” I roll my eyes because I’m sick. Sick of knowing that so long as she’s here, they will always have something on me. I hate having a weakness. I’ll never have one again after Poppy.

The silence is deafening in a way that I can hear the trees brush together. Royce takes deep breaths to calm his anger.

“Well... no, I don’t need to use her anymore,” K Diamond says, and I find him in front of me, wearing a silver face covering and black contacts in his eyes. He looks demonic, but that is the intention. That and to hide his identity because I know without a shadow of a doubt that this man knows Royce and Royce knows him. Well.

“And why is that?” I snap, raising my brows.

He takes a long, bated breath. As if he knows the next words that are coming out of his mouth are going to change me forever.

“I did what you wanted, K. Now where is my sister?”

“Well, unfortunately, she’s dead.” The words punch me directly in the gut and I stumble backward. This time it’s different because I know. Why would he tell me she’s dead if he could continue using her being alive against me if she was?

“What?” My lip curls upward and I feel my blood rush through my veins. I want to kill him. No, I would kill him. Just for fun, but my prized kill will be going to Skully. “Where the fuck is your brother?”

“Unfortunately, you were too late, Wicked.” He steps into my space and I launch forward, my hand flying to his throat. Two of the guards that are standing beside him shove me backward. On a normal day, I’d be able to fight them all off, but I’m weak. He knew what he was doing putting us in here. He knew not to feed us so that we stayed this way. Dormant and useless.

“Too late for what?” I roar, and K Diamond flicks his finger over my shoulder, waving the others out.

One of the guards has his hands around one side, and the other around my other.

“Your test was to get out, but you didn’t do that. You gave up. Weak.” The guards push me back into the igloo, slamming the glass door closed and locking it again.

Royce’s eyes come to mine, and his fingers go to both of his eyes and then to me. *I’ve got you* is what they say.

I shake my head, defeat racking through my body. Anger vibrates through me, but I can’t find the energy to fight back. When they’re all turned and making their way out of the clearing, I pick up the razor beside me, falling to the ground.

Tearing off my shirt, I toss it to the ground and bring the razor to my chest. Sinking it into my skin, I carve the words *the last petal fell*. My hands fall to the side, my eyes closing as my chest tightens and my throat closes.

Whatever gas he’s releasing into the den this time, I hope it takes me. I don’t want to wake up. Not now, not ever.

Two pointed bunny ears look down on me, covering eyes so fucking green they remind me of the ocean. She has soft lips, not quite as big as Ruby’s but big enough, and wears a tiny little bra and panties. I go to press up from the floor, only my hand collides with a mattress.

I’m in bed. She moved me.

I raise my hand to my chest and feel the covering over my cuts. And bandaged me. I want to ask who she is and why she is here, but I have the feeling that whatever K Diamond wants from me, it has to do with her. The den is clean, no sign of the struggles the last sixteen days have endured when it was filled with four of us. It’s not until I shift around the bed that I notice he has moved me to a separate igloo, one away from the last. Not much difference in this one, except there are latches on the bed, LED lights lining some appliances, and a large box at the foot of the bed.

“You are awake.” K Diamond’s voice comes through the box. “I’m sorry to do this to you, Wicked, and you have to know that you and I have no issues. Whatever you have going on with my brother is between you and him. So I give you this...” My shoulders rise and fall as I take in deep breaths. He couldn’t possibly give me anything. He has taken too much

already. “You do this. Give me six more days in here and I will give you the location of Skully once I see fit.”

I want to talk. I want to yell and call him every fucking curse word, but the anger I feel bubbling inside of me is stuck in my throat. I can’t even find the energy to address his bullshit.

“The girl who is looking back at you is in need of your service. I studied the video between you and La Rosa, and now this one needs you. Do you agree? And then I will let you free.”

I stare back at the green eyes through the glossy leather bunny mask, before going back to the camera. “Yeah.”

I give him six extra days, and the girl with the bunny mask hasn’t come back. My soul scratches against the areas inside of me that it knows it can use as an escape. I stay lying on my back, watching as the crescent moon slowly fazes past me and hides behind the thick trees. I don’t think about Poppy anymore. Blocking her name and face out of my memory because it burns too much to have it there.

I shoot to my feet when the door unlatches by itself, opening wide onto the outside. I haven’t felt fresh air touch my skin for days upon days. I don’t even know how many have passed now. Looking down onto my arm, I stare blankly at the cuts sliced into my skin, as if I’ve tried to scribble out the days I have kept track of.

“You’re free, Wicked.”

“You told me you would give me Skully.” I say, but stepping closer to the door, afraid it will close. That first brush of air flicks over my skin and I close my eyes to feel it whistle through my bloodstream and calm me.

“And I will. In time. For now? You’re free.”

I jolt forward, not bothering to get any of my clothes. I run so fast the wind slaps me across my face. I continue running through the dirty tracks until I come to a grass opening and field. I don’t want to go toward the asylum where he is. I wanted out this way. I needed it. To feel dirt between my toes and the air massaging my skin.

I stop when I reach a wired fence, grabbing it in my palms and ignoring when the stabs of barbed wire rip through them. I keep running. To feel blood finally rushing through my body as if it has been vacant all along. Headlights flash past up ahead and I know that I’m close to a road. A busy road. I keep running, shoving through fallen branches and dodging tree trunks. I tear through a clearing and pause when I see a car idling on the

curbside. Blacked out windows on a BMW isn't what has me stopping. It's when the door opens and the man who comes out stares back at me.

“Royce?”

He nudges his head to the car. “Brother.”

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Ruby

Time stands still when you're waiting for death. The words replay in my mind like a bad song that won't get out. A song with no tune, no melody, no lyricism. Death is God's way of regaining control. As if He needed a reminder because He knew that for years, it was Papa that held all of the control. It is Papa who owns all of the control. It has been one whole year since I gave Papa that envelope, and I still don't know what was inside of it.

"Principessa..." Mama's voice filters through the room and I turn slightly to face her. She stops at the threshold of the door, as if she knows how much they've taken from me but do it anyway.

Mama straightens her shoulders and continues all the way into the bedroom in my penthouse apartment in the city. It is fitting for them to do this for me. Keep me in Chicago for the reasons Papa always threatens. I know the threats aren't empty, and yet here we are, staring at each other because we both know.

We know that all of the threats over the year, the things we both did, mean nothing. Nothing because now? Now Papa is dead.

"I need you back at the house, Ruby. You don't need to be here anymore
___"

I cut her off, tilting my head. “Papa wouldn’t want me there.” I don’t bother to wait for her to answer, shifting my weight around to look through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows that overlook the city below. “He hated me toward the end.”

“He didn’t hate you, Ruby!” Mama scolds, entering into my space. I can feel her anxiety shiver over me as she lowers herself down onto my bed. “He didn’t understand you, and that is different from hate.”

“I can’t do this...” I whisper so harshly I almost choke on the words. “I can’t—”

Warm hands come to my cheeks and it is then that I realize I’m crying. I turn my eyes back to hers. “Mama, I can’t do this. I am not him. I can’t—”

“Ruby!” Her hard tone shakes me. A wake-up, if you will. I knew my obligations and agreed to them a long time ago, but it doesn’t mean that I’m not scared. I’m allowed to be scared around Mama, right? That’s what she’s here for. To allow me to be able to be scared.

I’m not so sure anymore.

Her blue eyes soften as her hands fall to either side of her. “Pack what you both need and meet me downstairs.”

Before she reaches the door to my bedroom, I stop her. “And what about Wolf?”

“Your father wanted everything for that child, Ruby. It was you who took him away from us, so remember that as you move into your new position.” The door slams closed and a single tear falls from my eyes. I can hear him rolling around in his crib. Leaning over the edge, I smile down at him, picking his little body up from the mattress.

“Little wild one...” I press a gentle kiss on his forehead. “Sorry in advance for the family lineage you have and for the things I’m going to have to do to keep us safe.” I know as I whisper those words into his little bed of hair, that I’m not talking about Papa.

Part Two

Present
Four years later



Wicked

I watch the ice melt into the golden liquid in my glass. I don't often think about my life leading up to the point where I was patched into Wolf Pack MC. Do I feel like a traitor? Fucking definitely, but my life before K Diamond doesn't mean shit going forward. That everything in my life needs to be superficial because having anything of value only means people can take it.

"Wicked!" Royce calls out from behind me. "We need you down here—now."

"What?" I turn in my seat at the bar. "Me sitting bitch on a fucking submarine isn't enough?" Royce and I have been inseparable since he picked me up that night. He's my brother. The only weakness I now have, and good fucking luck trying to take that big motherfucker away from me. He'd slit your throat before you even breathe near him.

"Shut the fuck up. Come on..." I push off the chair and swallow the rest of my whiskey. All the fucking drama with him and his old lady, who just happened to be the fucking bunny girl in my den all those years ago. All for this moment right here. The moment they've all been waiting for with K Diamond. Must be nice to extract your revenge on someone and know that

he's about to die. I need that one day, but unfortunately, this motherfucker still hasn't fulfilled his word about Skully.

Taking the steps two at a time, I watch as everyone from the MC filters in. Lion, our president and the man who took not only Royce in, but me too, stands back in the corner, watching the whole fucking thing.

When she steps aside, my anger dissolves. Wide, doe eyes and a small pixie face. Her hair is shorter now, cut around her jaw.

"Poppy?" I stammer backward, confused.

"Hey, big brother..." Reaching for her arm, I shove her into my chest and lay a single kiss on top of her head, breathing in her scent. "I thought you were fucking dead. Twice."

Her arms wrap around my torso, but not enough to reach either side. "I know. I'm sorry."

I step back, my eyes flying around the small confinement of the space. "What the fuck is going on?" There's a woman standing beside Lion, dressed in a black suit set. Poppy is beside Jade, and behind them are the rest of the brothers. Fury, Khaos, Roo.

"We all need to talk." Jade runs her hands down her pants, her eyes going to Poppy. "The girls who I managed to free while being under K Diamond's control have all banded together. We started an operation to help human trafficking victims and children who are caught in the trade. Over the years, my mother—" She pauses and looks at the woman by Lion. Lion, whom we've just found out is Jade's father. "Has helped pull survivors. We've gathered a group and continue to do the work for as long as we need to. Poppy." Jade points to my sister and I squeeze her under my arm. "Has been with us. I met her with K Diamond, Wicked, I'm sorry. I got her out, that's why you never saw her again. I'm guessing K didn't want you to know that because it would show weakness." She isn't wrong, and if there's anything that K Diamond didn't want, it was to look weak.

"I don't give a fuck." I tuck Poppy under my arm. "You're not going anywhere now."

Royce looks up at me from a smirk. "Good luck, Poppy."

We pull up to the compound, and the prospects on the gates open them up wide for us. Pulling in, I park the SUV to the right, where the bikes are all lined. It's a quiet night tonight. After all the drama with Jade, the clubhouse has been dead.

I cut off the car and watch as everyone piles out in the rearview mirror, Jade smiling up at Royce, and the rest of the brothers following them up the stairs that lead into the house. Our clubhouse is actually an old house that's right in the center of an industrial-sized piece of land.

"This what you've been doing?" Poppy asks, and the silence around us is tight because I know what she wants to ask. "Len, you can't live this life. You have—"

I turn to face her, narrowing my eyes. "You don't get to come back into my life and tell me what I need to and can't do. I *can* do this and *fuck* that side of my life, Pop. It's done nothing for me, for us. This? This is where my loyalties are and always will be."

She sighs, and I unclench my fist when I realize how hard I'm being on her. "Look, I only say this because one day, Len, they're going to come back for you. You know this."

"Good." I raise my brows at her. "I'll be fucking waiting for when they do—now, I'll show you where you're staying." Her words stick to the back of my brain like a bad taste. I already knew this, but Poppy saying it out loud only intensifies my fear. Now that I have her back again, I once again have something to lose.

"Wicked." Her hand rests on mine and I flinch. Her brows cross together but she removes her touch. "I have a home."

"Nowhere safe!"

She widens her eyes at me, the corner of her mouth twitching. "Actually, yes! But I'll stay with you for a few days before I head back."

"Back where?" I ask, pushing open the driver's door. I slam it closed as she rounds the back of the car.

"Chicago!"

I bare my teeth. "Of course you would live there." I ignore her jokes as we make our way up to the clubhouse. Music plays loudly and bikes rumble into the space behind us. Tonight's going to be a big fucking party. We all know it, and we all know Jade and Royce deserve it. This is a win for them, which makes it a win for us all.

Since the explosion a couple weeks ago, there have been some renovations around the place. For one, this oversized glass sliding door where a wall used to be. It works. So people can walk between the clubhouse and onto the patio, or down to the octagon below that's opposite the parking shed.

“I’ll go help Jade.” Poppy leans up on her tippy toes, kissing me on the cheek. “I’ll be fine.”

I watch painfully as she disappears through the front door, smiling when she sees Jade. My control wavers and I don’t take my eyes off her until she’s gone.

“Church in the morning.” Royce hooks his arm around my shoulder, handing me a beer. Lion stares at me from behind a smirk, and I lower myself down onto the stool.

“I’m gonna need something stronger than this.” I swirl the beer around in the bottle, just as Khaos climbs the stairs and squeezes my shoulder on passing. Khaos is the youngest one of us all, and the most fucking mischievous. Seems to never keep his dick in his pants and unfortunately, that has extended to Fury’s daughter, Silver. Fury is the one who walks around the clubhouse and absolutely no one wants a problem with. He served time. Hard time behind bars for murders he most definitely committed. We don’t ask how he got out.

“Your sister is fucking hot. There, I said it.”

I follow Khaos’ eyes as he looks back inside, the smirk on my mouth testing. “Yeah? Maybe you should try? Go on.”

He stares back at me with a blank look on his face. “You think I won’t?”

I shake my head, taking a sip of the beer. “No, I think you can’t.” I don’t bother telling him that Poppy has only ever been interested in girls since she was little. I’d rather watch his ego be crushed.

“So look, Royce here tells me that the Kyle shit didn’t even touch the surface of what you’ve done and been through. That there’s someone else?”

I lean back in my chair, exhaling a deep breath. Two years I’ve spent not thinking about all of the dark shit in my past. Pretending your demons don’t exist doesn’t make them stop chasing you...it only slows the race. “That’s right, but since K Diamond is dead now, I’ll never know shit about Skully.”

“This Skully chap...” Lion asks. “He a big threat?”

I think over his words, watching as the girls laugh inside the house while preparing bread rolls and salad. I haven’t seen Jade this happy since she’s been here. “Nah, I don’t think so. If that motherfucker wanted me dead, I’d be dead.”

“Good.” Lion shifts back. “Then tomorrow at church, I have a proposition for you.”

Weed and pussy are the general smells of the clubhouse, but with Jade and now Olivia spending more time around the place, they make sure the club girls are kicked out well before anything else.

I move to the back, behind the kitchen and through the space we hold church. I don't bother to say Royce said we were doing this tomorrow. Obviously, this proposition needs to be told now.

I take the spot beside Royce. This chapter isn't large. Lion, Khaos, Royce, Roo, Fury, and a couple of prospects. It's manageable to Lion and gives Royce and Jade that easy-going life they both want.

Lion blazes a joint, blowing out smoke and passing it around the table. I shake my head as Khaos takes it from Royce. "We have an issue. In-house. And I hate to bring this to the table so soon after what happened, but since Royce's and my girls are safe, figured we hit this one straight away. We have a chapter that needs doing over. The president there is weak, can't take fucking shit, and needs to be stripped of his patch. He's been doing dodgy fucking dealings with the cartel for years now—shit we never pulled him up on." Lion's eyes come straight to mine. "It's the Illinois chapter. Or, Chicago, to be precise."

I keep my eyes level on his. "Illinois? Didn't know we had one there." Even though he hasn't said it, I already know what he wants from me.

Royce stiffens beside me, his thigh pressing against mine.

Lion moves back against his chair as the silence eats up the space in the room. "I'm offering you to take it. You can take someone from here with you to be your right hand, but you can't take Royce."

Royce hisses, and I exhale a deep breath.

"Look." Lion leans forward and no one else speaks. "I get it. You're brothers, and asking this of you both is shit, but I figure with your background there, you would be the perfect person to have."

"I'm from Detroit," I warn, raising a brow.

"Detroit isn't the issue, though, and what we need from you doesn't involve anyone in Detroit."

My mouth closes when I realize what he's saying, shifting back to Royce. A guilty fucking looking Royce.

"You motherfucker..." I growl under my breath, ignoring him when he swirls his chair around to face me.

"I didn't tell him so that he could use it to get you there!" Royce pins his glare on Lion. "And he isn't going anywhere without me."

“Royce...” Lion warns. “You cannot take my daughter with you. I just got her back.” I watch as guilt washes over Royce’s face, his hand running over his hair.

“Fuck.”

“I’ll do it.” I place a toothpick between my lips, clenching my jaw. “But I can’t promise you she won’t kill me when she sees me.”

“What the fuck are we talking about?” Khaos asks, looking around the group. “Who won’t kill you?”

“Ruby La Rosa.” Lion smirks as he says her name, and fuck, if I haven’t heard it in some time.

“Holy shit. As in La Rosa—as in the fucking Cosa Nostra? As in the fucking Princess of Death?”

“What?” I turn my chair to face Khaos. “What the fuck do you know about the La Rosas?”

“Ah... I know that bitch is crazy, and that when her papa died and she took his place as the capo, things only got worse.”

My blood turns cold. “What the fuck are you talking about?” Shit. Victor fucking died?

“I don’t know her personally, but I’ve heard about her.”

“How?” I glare at him, scrunching up my face. “How the fuck have you heard of her?” My fists clench over my thighs, and Royce chuckles beside me when he notices.

“I mean, because she’s the hottest and youngest mafia capo in our fucking generation. Everyone knows who she is...”

“Oh my God.” I take my eyes off Khaos, the pretty little fucker, and look to Lion. “Do not say I’m taking him.”

“You’re taking him—” Lion grins at me.

I flick my toothpick in his lap. “Fuck you.”

Royce is the first to interrupt. “And what about L’artisanant?”

I shrug, turning toward him slightly. L’artisanant is the club we all opened. There are four levels for every kink, and the higher you get, the worse it becomes. It serves different purposes, one being Anonymous is able to find their greasy men who like to steal little girls. But it is mainly for us.

“We can open there too... give me something else to fuck with that isn’t her.”

Everyone bursts into laughter.

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Ruby

Whispers around the underbelly of Chicago kind of remind me of a high school cafeteria. You wouldn't think that some of these *scary* looking men had mouths that ran faster than a fucking Olympic medalist. Seriously fucking disappointing the more I think about it.

"Look, I didn't have anything to do with it—I swear. That wasn't us, baby!"

I lower myself down to his eye level, my Louboutin red bottom heel squishing over the puddle of blood that weeps out of his forehead. Tilting my head, I run the tip of my stiletto fingernail over the knife wound on his chest, watching as the pigment of his skin drains of any color, his eyes glazing over.

"I swear, Ruby! I didn't. I wouldn't do that to you, baby! You know me!" I stand straight, snatching the dishcloth that's hanging on the edge of the kitchen island and swiping my hands with it.

"Correction," I say, raising one perfectly manicured finger. "I know your cock, not you." Tossing the cloth onto his face, I wander around his lounge, looking at happy couple photos framed near the fireplace. "And

you're married?" I turn over my shoulder, a raised brow on him. I whistle. "Wow. Just when I think you can't go lower, you do."

"Look, whatever you want, take it! You want money? Is that it? Who are these people? Dude, who the fuck even are you?" He must be looking at Tony now, my head of security, or Val, my other right hand. At any second, either of them could snap his tiny baby neck.

Picking up a photograph, I look between the downtown city lights and back to the photo. "No kids?"

Roger splutters. "Fuck you, Ruby. I'm all into your creepy sex games, but this is too far!"

Placing the photo frame back onto the mantel, I slowly turn back to face him. "I take that as a no?"

"Fuck you."

I giggle, my eyes darkening on him. "Oh, honey..." My smile widens. "You wish that was what I was doing." I close the distance between us, and Roger's face falls. His anger diminishes.

"Lala, I hate to interrupt your—" Val gazes down at Roger. "Playtime, but we have a meeting with the New York outfit and we're already late."

"Wait—" Roger's hand comes to my arm. "You're Lala? As in La Rosa? As in Ruby La Rosa?" He bangs his head against the back of the kitchen counter. "Fuck! I should have known."

"Mmhmm," I say, dragging the tip of my knife up the curve of his jaw. "You should have known. You definitely should have known." I sink the tip into his jugular vein, as blood spills over my hand. I step back, grabbing the towel again and wiping my hands. I spin around, my eyes colliding with Val. "Oh, don't judge me."

"I'm not!" He raises his hands. "But you're gonna have to wash your hands before we leave and I'll call the cleanup."

Rinsing my hands in the kitchen sink, I pick my phone up from the counter and make my way to the door. "Yes, but I want those who know me to *know* this was me and I want the cops to continue chasing their little piggy tails guessing." I swirl my finger around the space, leaving the door opened for them both and making my way to our parked G 63. I slide into the back seat, opening my compact mirror and pulling out my powdered foundation. When they're both in and reversing, Tony is the first to say anything. He usually is. Tony is for my logic, where Val is for my chaos. He

fuels it. Makes me feel like my irrational actions are warranted. He's kind of like my hype man.

"Alright, I'm going to say it. I think you whacking off the Irish is a bad move."

"Bad, how?" I ask, batting my lashes at him in the rearview mirror. "Bad because he didn't even know who his grandfather is, or bad because now I've gone and stirred the pot for the first time in years?"

"Both fucking bad, principessa. We all know—everyone knows not to cross you, and they go to great lengths to make sure they stick to that, but you being a little shit stirrer and whacking off the long-lost Irish grandson, knowing that Jeremy had every intention of taking him under the family and teaching him everything there is to know—is bad." He isn't lying, I know it is, but I also know why I did it. If we had it Tony's way, we would negotiate our way out of bad situations. I'd rather leave a body count with Jimmy Choo stamps over their forehead. And anyway, the Irish aren't going to do anything. They can't now...

"You ready for this meeting?" Val asks, turning to face me. Val is also half Tony's age, so he's just—immature. I know that. He's even younger than me. But it works. He and I—work. As long as I don't accidentally fuck his pretty face. Which I have tampered with inner thoughts daily.

"As ready as I'll ever be." Val continues to drive us to the other side of town, and I open my phone and click a new message to Mama. Over the years, I've made it my mission to keep my family life separate from who I am here. Who I have to be and who I have so easily become. It's as though Papa saw the monster inside of me a long time ago and continued to feed it until it was ready to be unleashed.

"Mama," I say when she answers almost instantly. "Bedtime?"

"It is. He's all brushed teeth and ready for bed. Are you going to be back late tonight? I think Betty is staying over again." I take a deep breath and count to ten. Betty is the only part of my old life that I brought with me into my new. She's there for two reasons, but the main one is to keep me grounded.

"She will be there for a while, Mama. I'll be back later. Put Wolf on the phone." There's shuffling in the background before a little snore noise. "Is that my favorite little wild one?" He giggles in the background. "Have you brushed all of your teeth?"

“Yesh!” he says proudly, stammering over his words. Wolf is ridiculously smart, but he’s just not aware of it yet. He will be, though. One day. Unfortunately. “I bwushed allllll of them too because Nona said if I didn’t I wasn’t allowed Christmas chocolate!”

I stifle a laugh, my eyes drifting out the window to the bright city lights and busy streets. Some people are running, some pushing strollers, and others obviously heading out for a night out. “Nona is right, my love. Santa always knows when you haven’t brushed your teeth!”

“Love you, Mama.”

“Love you, son.” I hang up my phone and take in ten deep breaths.

One.

Two.

The car rolls to a stop at a red light, but I keep my eyes closed, calming my racing heart. It only beats for Wolf and my family, and those people are not who I’m going to see tonight.

Three.

Four.

A loud rumble of bikes rolls to a stop beside us, and if they weren’t so fucking loud, I probably would have continued my counting. My eyes open and I turn out the window to see who, or what, dickwad is using his big, loud engine as compensation for his little dick, when I see around ten men, all idling beside me. The one closest to my mirror has a large body and tight rippled muscles as arms. His fingers flex around his higher handlebars and I read the patch on his back.

“That must be the patch over that’s happening tonight,” Val says with a grin.

“Patch over?” I ask Val, unable to remove my eyes from the bike beside me. His bike is glossy white. The loud pipes that shake my car hook to the back near his tire. “I didn’t know about any patch over?”

“You wouldn’t and don’t because it’s fine. It’s civil, and they know that if it gets out of hand that you will have something to say about it.”

“Hmmm... and how do you know?” I ask, glaring at Val in the rearview mirror.

“Because my best friend from childhood rides with them. He’s patched in and is moving here with their new president.”

“Well...” I whisper. “Thank God for that because their last one here sucked.” The light turns green, and just as we pull away from them, I turn

to maybe get a look of the beast that sits on the bike beside my window, but as soon as I get a view, my hopes are crushed by the fact that half of his face is covered by a skull bandana and the other half a helmet.

“Damn. Could bet my money he was fucking hot.”

“And how would you know?” Tony asks, joking. Tony. Sweet, sweet Tony.

“My nipples never lie.”

Val bursts out laughing and we sit in silence for the remainder of the trip. Twenty minutes later, we pull into the entrance of the casino. It's well known within circles, because well, I own it. Honey Death was purchased before Papa died but was definitely done with his direction.

I slip out of the back seat and the valet takes the key from Tony as we enter the glitzy entrance. Crystal chandeliers hang from the high ceilings, the decor black and glitter. The reception desk is to the side, where black marble meets white stone, and instead of walls there are mirrors throughout. People say that mirrors are the first sign of vanity. That if you have more than one mirror in your room, you are vain. So I filled the whole fucking hotel with them.

We move our way through to the back, bypassing the elevators to the hotel rooms on the upper level and going straight for the escalators that take you down into the heart of the casino. Cigarettes and alcohol fill the air as soon as we step off and make our way through. It's a busy night, since it's a Friday, and not just any Friday, but Friday the thirteenth, so my head of promotions thought it would be good to host a haunted style casino night. Everyone is dressed up in some kind of weird, dark attire, and honestly, a few years ago I would have eaten this up. I always wanted Honey Death to be a cross between what younger people want in a casino, but without it being tacky. So far, so good.

Passing the roulette tables, I ignore the stares like I always do, as we reach the back room, where two security guards stand with weapons strapped across their chests. They both bow their heads, opening the doors. “Mrs. Lala.”

“Miss,” I correct. “For now.”

As soon as the back doors close, I breathe out a sigh and make my way through to the boardroom. This area is purposely for business meetings that I, one, need to make sure no one loses their shit and starts killing people, and two, is away from my family.

I push through the opening doors to the boardroom and smile when I see Camitro and his right hand on one side of the table, and Billy on the left side of the table with his two most prized men.

“Wow. I could smell the testosterone from upstairs.”

“You’re late, principessa...” Camitro scolds jokingly, a slight smile on his wrinkly face. “Should we be worried of why you’re late?”

I lower myself down onto the seat at the head of the table, rolling my lips beneath my teeth. *Why yes, yes, you probably should be.* “No. Not at all. Now, how can I help you both? I’d really *love* to get home to my kid before sunrise if that’s okay with you all.”

Camitro clears his throat, resting back against the chair. The lighting is dim, with the overhead in the middle of the table offering just the right amount to duck in the corner. “We have an issue.”

“What kind, and I figured or I wouldn’t be here.”

“Your cousins are running amok, and I can’t be the one to address it with your uncle. You know what happened last time he and I were in the same room? One of us almost lost our head.” I wave my hand for him to carry on. I already know the story—or should I say beef—between my favorite uncle and Camitro. And he’s right. But it wasn’t Unc’s head that almost came off. It was Camitro’s, which completely makes sense as to why he has come to me to address this, since he is, and I know this for a fact, afraid of the unhinged nature of uncle dearest. Camitro blows out a deep breath. “I’m all for making names and doing what you’ve got to do to protect what you got to protect, but Gio is snorting more cocaine than he is selling, and then there’s the issue of his activities. They need to be brought to the commission.”

I chuckle, leaning back in my chair and crossing my leg over the other. “No one likes a snitch, Camitro.”

“I’m not snitching, Lala, but there has to come a time where people have to be made accountable, and your papa knew that Giovi was going to be a problem and this is why he disagreed with a lot of what your uncle does. He’s a loose end, Ruby. You need to see that—”

I cut him off. “I’m Lala to you, not Ruby.”

“Lala,” he corrects.

I turn my chair to where Billy sits quietly, running his hands through his long blond beard. “And why are you here? You got issues with this too?”

“Nope,” Billy murmurs. “I’m here for a different reason.”

“Mmhmm. And what is that?”

“The letter that your father got from someone five years ago. You still got that?” My heart drops to my feet at the instant onslaught of memories that crash into me.

I blink, keeping my face void of any emotion. “No. Why is that?”

“I need to check over something, and I was hoping you had it on you.” I keep my eyes locked on his.

“You could have asked through a phone call.” Billy is from a smaller family in New York. He and Camitro get on to a certain extent, but it’s no secret how hard Camitro is to navigate.

“I thought we’d come along for the ride anyway...”

I stand from my chair, pressing my palms on the wood table. “Is this all?”

“No, we need to use Chicago to get through to Minneapolis. You think you could give us leeway to transport our next shipment?”

I wave my hand. “Yes, that’s fine.”

“Another thing.” Billy says just as I reach the doors. I need a drink, a cigarette, and a fucking cheeseburger after this conversation. But I knew it was coming. I knew that whatever Billy wanted from me had been nothing more than what he’s implying. He wants information on what Wicked wrote to Papa. Something I will never share with anyone. “I need you to rough someone up for me.”

I spin around, folding my arms in front of me. “Why don’t you do that? Hmm?”

Billy is around the same age as Papa, and I often think of why this greasy bastard is still alive but Papa isn’t. “Because she’s a woman.”

I narrow my eyes. “You do know that I’m a feminist, right? You—” I jolt my finger into him. “Have more of a chance getting me to rough up a man than a woman.” I lean down to his eye level, flicking his glasses with my index finger. “What’s the matter, hmmm? Someone turn you down?”

“Lala, stop being a smartass,” Camitro murmurs, and I snap, straightening my back.

“No. Because when any of you fucks want something from me, it’s shit like this. Because you can’t handle it yourself. Camitro, give me time to handle my uncle and cousin, and Billy? Maybe if you stuck to your fucking wedding vows, you wouldn’t have an issue.”

“She! She is going to talk, Lala!” Billy shoots up from his chair, and as soon as he says the words, I stop my movements.

Turning around again, I close in on him. “You dumb fuck. This is why you don’t stray from your fucking commandments!” My voice has bite at the end, but I spin his chair around until he’s facing me. “Maybe I should just whack you off, hmm? Rip the root out of the ground that’s causing the problem.”

“I’m sorry. I know, I know, but she found texts on my phone and evidence, Lala! She is going—” My fingers wrap around his throat and I squeeze slightly. Just enough to feel his throat crunch beneath my hand.

Leaning down, I bring my lips to his ear. “You’re going to be buried right beside your mistress.” I shove him back and leave the room, wiping my hands down on my suit pants.

“You a’ight?” Val asks from behind, handing me my packet of cigarettes. Eyes all shift to us as we make our way back through the casino, no doubt with Billy looking disgruntled not far behind us.

“No.” I snatch the packet off him and continue until we’re back at the lobby and outside, waiting for my car.

“You want me to take you somewhere?”

I blow out a cloud of smoke, watching as it thickens against the cool air. “Not tonight.” Tonight I need a fucking drink, a cheeseburger, and my best friend to calm me down before Wolf wakes in the morning. Nothing to do with dick.

I walk into the house, dropping my keys into the stone bowl near the front door and removing my jacket. Slipping off my shoes, I carry the brown paper bag into the sitting room, where Betty is relaxing, reading a book.

“You know, if half of these characters actually just sat down and spoke to one another, there would be no mystery to crime.”

I drop the bag onto the coffee table as she squeezes her book between the couch and grabs a bottle of tequila from the bar cart near the bookshelf. It’s cold outside since we’re moving into Christmas, but the house is always warm because of the multiple fires and heat systems. I need it. I’d cry if not.

Betty places two glasses on the coffee table beside an ice bucket and a bottle of tequila. “Wanna talk about it?”

I dig into the bag, taking out the fries and popping one into my mouth. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. It was just a weird day.” She pours us both a

drink and hands me mine before digging into her food.

“Well, you know that I’m here if you ever want to. Which! By the way... I need to tell you something.”

“Mmmhmm...” I smirk up at her, my cheeks burning. “I figured as much.”

“I’m leaving him.” She sucks down her drink before pouring another. Betty goes through this once a month. Her husband is a piece of shit, sure, and I will always be here for her when she does decide to leave him, but from last I checked—and that was when I threatened his balls—he wasn’t going to cheat again. Why anyone would cheat on Betty is beyond me. She is beautiful, charismatic, and has a way of making people feel better than how they were before her.

“Okay. Well, you can take the rooms here.”

She smiles, biting into her burger. “I love you. I don’t want to involve the parents yet.”

“I love you.” I chew on my cheeseburger. “There’s a new bar open in town. Shall we check it out this weekend?”

Betty’s eyes widen, her smile stretching on her face. “Like you have to ask! What’s it called?”

“L’artisanant.”

We both finish up our burgers and I tidy up the room before slugging my ass upstairs. Cracking open the door to Wolf’s room, I smile when my heart warms in my chest at his little body wrapped in blankets. Closing the door, I quickly head down to my bedroom, scrub through a shower, and toss my clothes into the dirty hamper, before slipping into some PJ’s. Putting my phone on charge, I head back out of my room and back into Wolf’s, turning his projector light down that has dinosaurs and cars patterning the ceiling. Pulling back the covers, I slide in behind him and pull his little body into my chest.

“I love you.”



Ruby

There were two kinds of people in the world. I learned this very early on in my life and I think the more that I really thought about it, the more obvious it became. There were people like my papa, and people like Mama. Somehow, I got stuck between two of them.

Mama always wanted to do what was right. Her moral compass never faltered. But Papa? Well, Papa had none. He did what he needed to do at all times, regardless of what that looked like to other people. He did what he needed to protect the family, and not just ours, but our extended and others in different outfits too. I wanted to be just like him. I knew that, he knew that—my mother unfortunately knew that.

My phone hasn't stopped ringing since six a.m. Fucking six a.m. And if it's Billy or Camitro, I might actually end up killing the both of them.

Cutting up the piece of toast into squares and moving watermelon and grapes around his plate, I place it on the table, kissing Wolf on the top of his little head. He reminds me so much of *him*. The eyes, smile, and dimple. "Be right back, baby. Mama's got a call with Santa!" Snatching my phone off the table, I head out of the kitchen and down the hallway before swiping to answer.

“What!”

“We got a problem...” Val chuckles in the background, and I hear doors shut closed before he continues. “You know that patch over?”

“Yes...” I hiss, peeking around the corner to check on Wolf. Mama is sitting beside him now, with Betty lifting him up to place him on her lap. “What has that got to do with me?” I whisper harshly. “It’s Saturday. You know weekends are for family.”

“Yeah, I know, which is why I wouldn’t bring this to you if it wasn’t important.” Val is my strongest soldier. I give him a lot of shit, but I trust him more than I do anyone else.

“Okay—” I breathe. I seriously need to take up Pilates or Tai chi or something to help with keeping myself in check. “Go.”

“There’s a bit of a bloodbath here right now.”

“So?” I snap, grinding my teeth. “That’s MC business, not mine!”

“Well... that’s the thing. You might need to get down here because I feel like this has to do with you too.”

I hang up my phone and make my way back into the kitchen, leaning against the doorframe. I watch as Betty airplane drives pieces of fruit into Wolf’s mouth and he giggles, flashing his cheesy smile. His smile, unfortunately, is almost a replica of his father’s.

My smile falls.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, baby,” Mama says, rubbing her hand up my arm. “You look at me.” When I don’t, her gentle hands come to my cheeks and she brings my focus down to hers. Mama hasn’t aged at all since I was a teenager. The genes are strong, and I know that whatever she needed to do to survive had to be done. I think it takes children growing older to realize the kind of sacrifices our parents make at times. “This is your life. It’s what you are here for.”

“But I just wanted to be a mom... like you were.”

“Baby, you are so much more of a mother than I ever was.” She straightens her shoulders and I watch as the sun beams behind her, making her already blue eyes brighter. “Now go and do what you were born to do. Your family will be here waiting when you get home.”

“Break some balls, sis!” Betty calls out as I make my way down the hallway.

“Balls!” Wolf repeats, and I hear a buckle of laughter follow behind me up the stairs. It’s not that I hate what I do. I enjoy it. I can’t imagine not

doing it now, and although I thank Papa every day for giving me this, I also want to bring him back to life so I can just have the first few years with Wolf.

Losing myself in my closet, I pull out a black blazer, a white crop top, and tight black leather pants. Pairing it with a pair of white pointy Jimmy Choo boots and a white handbag, I shuffle through my makeup. Whatever the bunch of idiots has done can wait. I don't leave the house looking less than nowadays.

Brushing out my dark hair, I pause when I look at myself in the mirror, blinking back a memory, only it takes me with an iron fist.

I couldn't fucking believe Betty dragged me here. To this damn place. To a party. After last week happened, the week I didn't talk about, I thought Betty was trying to get my head back into the game with a distraction. And I didn't even tell her the full story of what happened between Wicked and me.

Fucking asshole.

I expected Papa to be mad when I gave him the parcel. So fucking mad. When he gave me a blank expression and read whatever it was that was in the envelope, I was so mad that I ended up blurting out what Wicked had done. How he had basically kidnapped me and that when whatever his little plan he had with me didn't work, he needed to backtrack. Of course, Papa gave me nothing after that too. But things changed.

I felt the distance in the house. Where it was once warm, it now felt empty. Cold. Like a distance that could never be filled. I hated it.

"You are getting into your head again!" Betty shoved the bottle of cheap vodka into my chest, even though I told her I was more of a tequila person. "Come on! Doesn't it get boring being the good little angel girl who does everything everyone wants?"

I raised the lip of the bottle to my mouth and took large enough gulps. "It does. But that's not what this is—" I swiped my mouth with the back of my hand when laughing caught me off guard.

"Oh my God..." My hand came to my mouth and I slowly lowered the bottle to the floor. "Betty, I'm late."

I blink through the memories, my fingernails scratching down my chest. I don't want to think of the cryptic letter he wrote Papa.

Scrubbing my face clean of the tears, I massage on moisturizer, before starting on my makeup. Makeup is the ultimate concealer for life. If only

they gave something similar for the bruises people leave on your battered soul.

I'm just finishing up my lips and moving my hair to one side when my phone chimes from a text message.

This weekend. I need you.

My blood boils, but I swing off a text anyway. **Sure. I will be there.**

Because I have no other fucking choice. And he knows that.

Sweeping up my bag and phone, I make my way out of the house, where my G 63 is parked, with Tony on one side and another soldier on the other.

“You ready?” Tony asks, opening the back door.

“As I’ll ever be.”

He drives us over to central Chicago. I have never been to the Wolf Pack MC headquarters, or whatever it is they called it before, and I never thought I actually would be. Why the hell else would I need to be at some washed-up fucking biker bar where crusty old men lie?

No thanks.

Catch me at a bar downtown before you’d catch me here.

We pull to a tall, wired gate. It doesn’t look run-down, or even neglected. Immediately not what I expected, but it does look private. You can’t see in or out of that thing.

A young guy dressed in a black vest with no patches comes to the driver’s side window. “They’re in the back. Drive straight through to the left, past the clubhouse. You’ll see a small dirt road which will lead you farther down and into a barn.”

A barn—great.

“No problem.” The gate opens and Tony drives us in. The closer I get, the more my breathing feels labored. As if I’m wearing a shirt too tight and I can’t get in enough oxygen. Fuck. I should have taken a Valium.

Directly in front of us is a large building, which I’m guessing is the clubhouse. There’s an iron sign on the front that has the words *Wolf Pack* embossed into the metal, ahead of a porch with chairs scattered around it. A sliding door opens up to the inside, to what I’m guessing is a really fucking big space, and in front are where bikes line up perfectly. To the left is what looks like a fighting ring, or cage, and to the right is parking for cars.

Tony directs us to the left and around the corner of the clubhouse.

“Jesus fucking Christ—” Tony says, and I shuffle in front to see what he’s seeing. A barn is hidden behind thick shrubs of trees, and cars are parked haphazardly at the front. Limo, black, sleek, and European.

This isn’t good.

“What is happening? I don’t like going in blind.” Before the car can stop, Val walks out, waving our car toward the barn door, where it’s wide open. I can’t see anything inside but the cars and bikes at the front, some fallen over. Dead giveaway of the kind of chaos that has happened here.

The car stops, and before Tony can come around to open my door, I slide out and slam it closed behind me, glaring at Val.

“Seriously? What the fuck am I doing here, Val? You fuck a biker’s woman? Hmm?” I flick his chest and roll my eyes, stepping over the wet ground. Puddles of blood are meshed with the mud and I turn around, glaring at Val again. “I’m going to kill you.”

“Look, I know, but listen! Lala!”

I spin around as he grabs my arm. “I need to warn you what’s inside, because it’s not pretty.”

“Really?” I snap. “Well, neither am I!”

Val rolls his eyes. “Girl, shut up. No, but seriously.” His hands are on my arm and I search his eyes, looking for a sign. Anything. “This is bad. It’s Gio, he got your—” I don’t let him finish the sentence before I push away from him and head into the barn, my heart racing in my chest. What the fuck have you done, Gio?

I enter through the doors and pause when I see the pile of bodies lying in the middle on top of each other.

“Okay. Someone needs to tell me what the *fuck* is going on.”

I turn to the side, where I see a group of men, all bikers. One older, one slightly younger and attractive. He grins at me and I narrow my eyes. Okay, more than attractive, and then an even younger one beside him. “Anyone? Why the fuck am I here?”

“Because of me, principessa...”



Ruby

At the sound of his voice, I spin around. It can't be. There have been times during my life where I have thought that maybe it was wrong. Something was wrong.

"Papa?" I freeze when I see him standing on the other side, his suit soiled with blood and his cheek cut. I run toward him, my arms flying around the back of his neck to pull him into me. Even now, as a grown woman in four-inch heels, I whimper in my father's embrace. "What is happening?"

"Ah, my girl. You have been so good these years."

"Papa, what the fuck is happening?" I gesture to the bodies piled up in the middle of the room. Ten, at least. "How and why?"

"A lot of reasons, none of which we have any time to discuss right now, principessa. We can continue back at the clubhouse."

"Wait!" I hold up my hand. "Why here? What has this MC got to do with us?"

"Me," a voice echoes from behind me, and even though it sounds familiar, even just a little, it doesn't.

Rolling my eyes, I turn around to ask who the fuck they are when my stomach drops to the ground. There. Staring back at me, is both the reason for my pain and my solace. The only man who ever had any power to both break me and put me back together again. He was my own personal nightmare. The kind that gave you butterflies.

His eyes are void, even more so than I remember, but he's bigger. As if he's grown into the kind of monster he always was. His features are harder, but somehow still beautiful, but his eyes... his eyes aren't the kind I have in my memories. They're darker now.

My heart stammers in my chest and my throat closes in. It's as though something so simple like breathing is almost impossible. All of the years I spent building up my character, my cred, it all crumbles to the ground at his presence.

My mouth opens and I say the first thing I can think of. "I thought you were dead."

Wicked steps forward, pushing off the wood that he was leaning on. "You fucking wish."

I clench my jaw tight, holding my breath. "Yeah, I do." Then I turn back to Papa, searching his eyes. Wrinkles curve into the middle of his forehead, a silent question I'm hounding him an answer for.

He shakes his head softly. *No. I didn't tell him.*

Blowing out a steady breath, I take Papa's arm and direct him out the entry. "This better be good. Why would you lie to Mama and me? Why?" He opens the back door to my Mercedes, gesturing me to slide in first. When the doors are closed and it's just us inside with Tony in the driver's seat and Val as the passenger, he finally says, "Because there's a threat to our family. To me. To your mama. Me being around was only making it worse."

"So you can come home now?" I ask, searching his face. His beard is longer, his eyes darker.

"Not yet. Soon." He pats my thigh. "I'll explain more at the clubhouse, where it's secure."

I sigh, looking out the window and catching the horses in the far end of the paddock. The grass is thick and manicured, the trees and shrubs perfectly kept. It's bizarre how beauty can exist around death.

Tony stops the car outside the clubhouse, and I slide out behind Papa as we make our way up the steps that lead to the patio. Roasted meat and

garlic drifts out of the open doors, and before I've reached the entry, I can hear laughter.

The laughter stops when I pause. Three women are standing in what looks to be the kitchen that hangs off the patio. It's higher than the entrance to the actual clubhouse below. As if they wanted the kitchen to be separate from whatever goes on underneath.

Tony and Val stand behind me, Papa right beside. I can see movement from the side, as I'm guessing all of the bikers who were in the barn walked down.

"Oh, hi," one girl says. She has black hair, bright green eyes, and a smile that's way too bright this time of day. "You must be Victor's daughter, right?" One of the other girls comes up beside her. Blonde hair, blue eyes, and the complete opposite of her friend. "I'm Jade, this is Sloane and Silver." They all look at me with a mixture of emotions on their faces. Jade seems genuinely happy to meet me, Sloane is curious, and Silver, I can see is just happy to be here.

"Girls, yes, this is my daughter." Papa enters, and I step backward, betrayal wrapping itself around my body and unwilling to let go. For years, I stepped into his shoes and took on everything he left me. I sacrificed my family, my life, to take capo and handle the family business *as I was supposed to upon his death*, but all along he's been alive, what? Living with his favorite fucking son.

I bang into a hard wall, my foot faltering, and I spin around to say sorry when I see it's Wicked, staring down at me with hard eyes. "Get in the fucking house, Ruby." The bite of my name makes me flinch. I don't bother to look at Tony or Val, who have never really seen me around Wicked. I mean, they don't count. At least for Tony. He was too busy with Papa to watch my dumb teen angst.

"You were hiding him?" I straighten my shoulders and bend my neck to look up at him anyway. And after all this time, it's still only him who can force my power to its knees.

"So what if I was?" Wicked murmurs, brushing closer to me. "What the fuck you gonna do about it, hmm?" My eyes narrow as he sidesteps and makes his way into the kitchen, scooping up a bottle of beer. He lowers himself down onto the barstool, his arm hooking around the blonde girl's belly as he pulls her between his legs, taking a swig of his beer while his eyes remain on mine.

“You just gonna let that shit slide?” Val mumbles beneath his breath, a half-smirk on his face, just as one of the other bikers from earlier climbs the steps, jumping on Val’s back like a toddler. He’s the younger one with a pretty smile.

“I missed you. You miss me?”

The other biker, older hot one, shakes his head from behind them both. “Go play with each other in the clubhouse. Girls don’t wanna see that.”

“Well....” Jade wiggles her brows.

“Watch it,” he warns, and Jade laughs as he scoops her up. I stand still, unable to wrap my mind around what the fuck is happening.

“Lion,” a growly voice says from beside me. He’s older, but no less good looking than the rest of them. His gray hair is slicked back, his tattoos all on display. He’s big too, not as big as Wicked but still big. He gestures to the bar chairs on the patio that are attached to little round tables. “Wanna take a seat, sweetheart, so we can talk.”

“Oh.” I chuckle under my breath while pulling out the stool opposite him. “I can’t tell you how much I am not a sweetheart.”

“Something we agree on...”

I ignore Wicked’s jab, grabbing the packet of smokes on the middle of the table and biting one into my mouth.

Lighting the end with my black Zippo, I place it on the table and cross my legs, removing my blazer and allowing it to hang off the chair behind me. I’m well acquainted with power struggles, but right now it isn’t between Lion and me, not even Papa. It’s between my nemesis, who thinks having a girl on his lap is affecting me the way it would have all those years ago, and me.

I blow out a cloud of smoke. “Come on, Papa Dearest.” I flick my eyes up at him, catching everyone else watching me carefully. Khaos, I think his name is, can’t take his eyes off my midsection, and the rest of the guys are trying to pretend they’re not staring.

I don’t bother with Wicked.

Papa takes the chair beside mine and I flick ash into the ashtray. “What the fuck has been going on?”

Lion leans forward. “Your family has threats outside of the Cosa Nostra, Lala. Ones that are beyond Victor’s control and even your own.”

“I’m listening.”

“Do you remember when Wicked gave you that envelope all those years ago?” Papa asks softly, and I finally look toward him, my throat threatening to close. I mourned him. I thought he was dead and that Wolf would never know who his grandfather was. The man who taught me so much. It broke my heart every time I thought about the events that he would miss, yet here he is. Sitting with a bunch of outsiders because he doesn’t want to consult with his family and keep it in-house.

I swallow back the taste of betrayal from both of them. “Yes.”

“If you had opened it, you would have seen—”

“What makes you think I didn’t open it?” I smirk around the trunk of my cigarette.

“Because I fucking told you not to?” Wicked growls from beneath his—
whoever she is.

I drag my eyes to where they are, keeping the grin. “Aw, and how very un-Ruby Rose of me to not go against your orders.” I stub out my cigarette. “I read the note. *Victor, it’s out. They know about me and what I did. She needs to marry Mikhail.*” I wave my hand in the air, smiling at Khaos who slides a glass of vodka over to me.

Papa’s eyes shoot to Wicked before resting back on me. “I know you can, Bubba. But this is something else. It’s someone in-house.”

“I’m waiting!”

“Ruby!” Wicked barks and I flinch, my eyes flying over Papa’s shoulder and landing on him and his lap dog. “Give your old man a fucking minute, yeah?” My mouth closes and then opens.

“First of all!” I keep my eyes on Wicked even though it burns to do so. “You don’t get to tell me what to do anymore, Wicked. You gave up that right years ago.”

His cheeks spread into a wide smile, flashing his white teeth and perfect dimples. I didn’t notice when I first saw him, but he has a tattoo on the side of his neck and that nose ring is still there. I’m annoyed at how much it all suits him. Instantly annoyed. Fuck. “That’s funny. That’s real fucking funny.” He buries his head into the crook of the girl’s neck, biting down on her skin.

I catch Jade’s eyes, which go from the girl, to me, to Wicked a few times, before coming back to me. Between the underlying silent conversation we both share, I can see it in the back of her mind, the wheels spinning.

“Oh my fucking God!” a little voice squeals from behind, and Wicked flies up so fast from his chair the blonde bitch stumbles to the ground. I’d laugh if I didn’t recognize the girl’s voice instantly.

I stand from the stool and pause when I see Poppy standing at the bottom of the stairs. Her hair is long and blonde, her eyes wide with shock. She looks the same. “Pop?”

She smiles so wide that my heart expands with it and I crash down the stairs, shoving Val out of the way. My arms fly around her neck. I squeeze her so tight—tight enough to make sure this isn’t a dream. She can’t run away. Papa, I’m mad at. Too mad to enjoy him being home.

“Where have you been?” I smack her arm but hook mine in hers and drag her up the stairs. “We are having a drink right after I finish God’s work.”

“That’s funny. They sent the devil to do God’s work?” Wicked snickers before dragging his eyes off me and onto Poppy. “I told you to stay at the house.”

Poppy rolls her eyes and shoves him out of the way. “Yeah, then I found out that my long-lost sister is here. I’m not going anywhere.”

I force down the laugh that wants to come out as she moves through the kitchen area. “I’ll get our drinks cold while you—do the devil’s work.”

Lowering myself back onto the barstool, I flutter my lashes up at Wicked. “Aw, now would you look at that. Just like old times.”

“Jesus Christ...” Royce mutters, grabbing Wicked’s shoulder and dragging him through the same way Poppy went. “You need to explain shit better.”

Breathing out a sigh, I look between Lion and Papa. “Now what were you saying?”

A look passes between the two of them before Papa leans back in his chair and flexes his fist on his knee. “You remember much from when you were a little girl?” I blink, running the edge of my thumb over the bottom of my lip. I pretend that it’s to check my blood-red lipstick, but really it’s to form a long enough pause to decide how to answer.

“A bit. Why?”

The skin on the corner of Papa’s eyes wrinkles as his smile softens and his hand rests on my knee. His tattoos are old now, faded from sun and aging, but he still looks like a badass. “How much?”

I shake my head, looking back into the house until I catch Jade's eyes. "I think it's time for a drink."

"Principessa!" Papa says, his hand coming to my arm.

"No!" I snap, spinning back around to look down on him. "You left, Papa. You left Mama and me to pick up the mess you left behind. I thought you were dead, so everything I did, I did in your honor. To make you proud, and all along? You were alive. And now you want to talk about *my* childhood? About some vague note that was inside a parcel that fucking Wicked gave me after he goddamn kidnapped me and traumatized me inside a maze with a bunch of hillbilly fucking weirdos that sit around campfires and burn people on upside-down crosses? Hmm? Fuck you." I yank my arm out of his grip. "Fuck both of you. I'm having a drink, and then maybe—maybe—I won't accidentally kill you both for the shit you've put me through throughout the years." I continue toward where Jade stands, holding a bottle of tequila in one hand and two glasses in the other.

Her green eyes are wide. "I get the feeling you're a tequila girl..."

I take the glass from her and trail behind as she takes us down steps that lead to the area downstairs. "You guessed right." This is a clubhouse I definitely expected. There's a bar at the back with a flag hanging above the liquor cabinets. Couches are against one side of the room, where a billiards table is in the middle. A stripper pole opposite the other side, and more lazy seating. The main door is rolled open, so you can see directly out the front to where the parking is and where bikes are lined, separating the entry to the front area, and around the back of the bar, there's an identical door that's open with more tables and seating and where the bar wraps around to be mirrored. That side is widened out to see the mountains in the back and greenery. Unfortunately for me, I also know that a few yards back from there, there's a stack of bodies on a mountain of one another. I wonder how the hell they're going to get rid of that. Fucking Gio. I know he had his hands in helping Papa.

"So..." Jade directs us to the other side of the bar, sitting on a swing chair hanging from the overhead pillars. She pats the spot beside her. "This is my favorite spot since being here. At least I can look out at the mountains and pretend my man isn't a complete psychopath."

I snicker, rolling my lips behind my teeth to stop my laugh. "I don't know what the fuck is happening."

“You don’t know me,” Jade says, turning her body to face me. Music is blaring off behind us, and I can hear more bikes rumbling into the entrance. “But I think I have a feeling of what is going on between you and Wicked.” I take the first sip, hissing when the tequila burns its way down my throat before settling in my belly. “You and he?”

It’s a question, and one I don’t mind answering because it’s too obvious to ignore even if I wanted to. “It has happened. Continues to happen.”

“Really...” Jade smiles proudly. “He’s so secretive and—”

“—annoying?” I add, and we both laugh. For the first time in years, with the exception of Betty, I feel my age. Like the world and life I was thrust into can fucking wait. Also knowing Papa is still alive has taken a load off my shoulders, even for just a few moments.

Jade’s laughter dies out and she looks out into the far distance. “I knew Wicked when he was younger too. I heard your little spew to your dad inside, and I feel like it may be the same place I met him.” I shift around to face her while running my fingers through my hair. It’s dark, but not as dark as Jade’s. Her black strands offset her light eyes, though, a little similar to mine. Maybe he has a fucking type.

“You knew him?” I flex my fingers, watching as the sun hits the diamond rock on my finger. It was a gift from me to me.

“Well, I knew him to an extent. I guess you could put it that way.”

I leave the words between us. I’m familiar with old skeletons and not wanting to resurrect them.

“What’s happening?” Poppy comes in with the other girl in tow. She has silver blonde hair and tattoos all over her skin. They both drop down on the sofa opposite us.

My cheeks sting as my smile widens on Poppy, watching as the sun sets in the background behind her. “I can’t believe you are alive.”

“Ditto! I thought for sure you and Wicked would have killed each other.”

“Oh...” I chuckle, taking a sip of my drink and moving my hair to the side. “Trust me, we almost did.”

Poppy’s smile widens. “You look amazing. I loved you as a blonde, but I’m digging the brunette vixen.”

Sighing, I swirl the drink around in my glass.

“That bad, huh?” Poppy adds, and my eyes slowly meet hers. It’s the first time I feel sadness creep into my bones and chill me to the core. I spent

years keeping a wall in front of my emotions whenever I left my house. It was a ritual.

I nod slowly. “Yeah.”

Poppy shuffles her body forward, resting her hand on my knee. “We can talk about this later.” She leans back on her elbows, wiggling her brows. “But update me! You married?” I drift off into the distance, tracing the outlines of the high peaked mountains behind the trees where the barn is. Little do they know, the kind of ugliness that lies deep inside.

“No!” I whisper. “Not married.”

“Ahhh, but she does other things!” Val kneels down beside me.

“You’re interrupting the first kind of girl talk I have had in years.” I search his eyes. “This better be important.”

He leans into my ear. “It’s Wolf.”

I look down at the gold Rolex strapped around my wrist, pushing up from my chair. “I’ll be back!”

“You better!” Poppy calls out as I follow Val back through the front of the bar and passing the sea of leather and cigarettes. I feel eyes move with me as I find my way out through the main door. The outside air slaps me across the face like a bucket of water and I pull my phone out of my handbag. The light from the phone burns my retinas as I push call on Mama’s phone and look over my shoulder carefully to make sure no one is following me. “Val, keep an eye out.”

Val nods but looks down. I guess within three seconds of seeing Wicked he knew who Wolf’s father was. And I can’t go into the irony of his father now being a member of Wolf Pack MC.

“Mama!” Wolf’s little voice echoes through my phone and I smile widely, slowly putting distance between the chaos happening in the clubhouse and me.

“Hey! What did Nona make for dinner?” My feet continue to take me forward until I’m staring at a familiar gloss-white Harley. The same one I saw parked beside us at the lights. Closing my eyes in realization, I shake my head softly. Of course. Of fucking course it was him. “Did you eat it all up?”

He snorts through the phone. “I did. And Nona said that this weekend we can put up the Christmas decorations!”

My heart swells in my chest. “Buddy, it’s only November.”

“Annnd?” he asks, dragging out the word.

My smile deepens. "Okay. Then this weekend we will go Christmas shopping."

"Okay! Good night, Mama!"

"Night, baby." I hang up my phone and shut the screen off.

"A kid?" Wicked's voice punches me right in the gut and I jump in shock, spinning around. Shadowed in the darkness of the carport, his outline becomes painfully obvious the harder I blink. A hoodie covering half of his face, he leans against a car, feet crossed at ankles and hands buried in pockets. "Never would have pegged you for the mothering type."

My heart claws at my ribcage as my blood beats through my ears. "I guess others would think otherwise." Turning my head over my shoulder, I find the girl he was with earlier near the bar, her arm around Jade. "Married?" He doesn't answer, so I slowly bring my eyes back to his. I can't see anything above his nose, and from here, the shadow and outline of his sharp cheekbones and pillow lips is almost too annoying to see.

"If I said yes, what would you do?" he asks, and I don't miss the dip in the corner of his mouth where he wants to smirk.

I take a step forward, running my hand over my shoulders, the adrenaline slowly wearing off. "I'd say that you're braver than me."

"Ruby?"

I don't look back at him, keeping my eyes locked on the way the girl moves around Jade. Her arms frail around Jade's body, her head tilting back to laugh, showing her straight teeth. She's pretty, sure, but I expected more.

"Ruby!"

I snap, coming back to Wicked. "What?"

"Stop being a fucking idiot."

"I'm not. I date them, apparently." I shove my phone back into my handbag and turn back toward the clubhouse. I need to make my way back into the safe area with Jade and Poppy. Away from him and any questions he may ask. I don't know why I ever kept Wolf from Wicked. I think a big part of me told myself that I did it because I didn't know how to find him or thought he was dead, but I know that's not true. Standing here today, with him right in front of me, I know that's not true, but now it's like the lie I told myself for years is quicksand and I can't seem to get my feet out of it.

"Date who? The father to your kid?" he asks before I can take another step closer to the clubhouse. I lock eyes with Papa, who is sitting at the bar watching us from afar.

I turn to face him again. He's closer now, his hoodie moved off his face and resting at his neck. "Boy or girl?" He takes another step.

I take one back. "Boy."

"Hmmm." His eyes narrow. The air shifts around us and my throat tightens, as if gaining any air is impossible. "He must be old? Old enough to have conversations about Christmas?"

I step back again, my heel crunching over the loose stones. I eat men for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, yet in his presence, I cower. Every time. It's as though even after all of these years, it's still him. Just him who has enough masculinity to soften me. "He's very smart."

Wicked takes another step, tilting his head to the side. I watch as his dark eyes dance over my skin before flying back up to my face. "How old?" Fear crawls over my skin.

I take three steps back, faster this time. The music becomes louder, and people who were standing outside have stopped talking. "How old, Ruby?" Oh shit. His voice is louder.

"Fuck." I go to turn around to find Papa when Wicked's hand is on my arm, pulling me back around until I crash into his chest.

"Yo!" Val moves forward with Tony, but my hand flies up to stop them both.

Peering up at Wicked's face, I trace the sharp edges of his devilishly defined features. The sunken cheekbones, thick lashes and brows, and soft lips.

"Kids," Papa says from behind. "You want to do this here?"

We both ignore him, just like we did when we were kids.

My eyes blaze onto his. "Four."

His face falls as if all of the anger and suspicion he had evaporates from his features. "I fucking hate you." He shoves me away roughly, taking heavy steps toward his bike.

"Wicked!" I snap, but he ignores me, picking up his helmet and firing up his bike. The loud engine rips through the air as he guns it out the driveway. "Fuck." Turning back around, I find Papa. "He's going to the home!"

"Shit!" Papa runs his hand through his hair, opening a phone that is in his pocket.

"Val! Get the car. Now." Rushing back through the entry, I find Jade and Poppy, with the blonde now beside Jade.

“Poppy, you might want to come—”

“—look, I don’t know who you are, but I’m *his* old lady, so w—”

Removing her hand off my arm with two fingers, I glare down at the blonde. “I don’t give a fuck who you are to Wicked.” I turn back to Poppy and soften my smile. “You’re going to be angry with me, but you need to come.”

Poppy’s hazy eyes settle on mine, but she shoots up after hearing the urgency in my tone. “Okay, I’m coming.” I squeeze Jade’s shoulder on passing, banging into Poppy’s back when she stops abruptly and turns back to face the blonde girl.

“And Sloane—”

“—I’ll handle it!” Jade shoos us away, and I grab Poppy’s arm, dragging her outside and past onlookers. My Mercedes is idling at the front, with Royce, Khaos, and Lion already off on their bikes down the long driveway. Guilt claws its way through my chest as Val drives us off, Tony deciding to stay with Papa. Papa who still won’t come home.

“What’s happening, Rubs?” Poppy asks softly, and I lean my head against the glass, watching as the trees pass by. Val floors it as soon as we hit the main road and I turn back to face Poppy.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you this, but in my defense, I thought you were dead.”

Her hand comes to my thigh. “Yes. Of course. Now what is it?”

I blow out a deep breath, handing her my phone. She pushes the home button and Wolf’s face fills the screen. He’s smiling brightly, two perfect dimples on each cheek, and dark, almond eyes.

“Oh...” Her tone is high, eyes wide. It’s not until her mouth curves up in a smile that I let out my breath. “I’m an aunty?” She looks back at me with bright eyes.

“You are.” My chest squeezes tight as she launches forward, wrapping her arms around the back of my neck. “This is—oh my God, he is going to kill you.” Poppy’s smile falls as she goes back to her chair. “We can handle him.”

“Eh.” I crawl back in my seat. “I don’t know if I know how anymore, and with everything else going on, I don’t think I can find my cares.”

“Well, I need to update you on what I’m doing now. So during this trip, I may as well info-dump you. The man who raised Wicked and me is bad

bad. The worst. He had a brother, and that was who you met with Wicked all those years ago.”

“Your guys’ parents? The one Wicked killed?”

Poppy winces. “No. Not that right now, but this other man was called K Diamond, and he basically held Wicked and Royce and a few others in a den for months, making them do and act on really fucked-up shit. Jade was also involved in it all—but anyway!” she rushes as we pull to a stop sign. “I now help run an organization—”

“—Anonymous.” I watch as her mouth falls open. “I have heard about you all.”

Poppy nods, pulling down the little skirt she’s wearing with her tights. “Yeah, I guess you would have.”

“Well, unfortunately, my work is the opposite.” I blink past the emotion. “Far from a savior.”

She stifles a laugh, swiping her mouth with the back of her hand just as we pull up to the manor. The gates part open and bikes are lined at the front door. Mama must have let them in. “Someone has to be the bad guy, right? At least it’s you.”

I push open the door and wait for her to round my side before taking her hand in mine. “Yes. At least it’s me.”



Ruby

I thought over this day so many times since giving birth to Wolf. How it would happen or how I would tell Wicked. I struggled with envisioning how the words would come out, since I know that I've never wanted to say them to begin with. But standing here, watching him hover over Wolf's bed in his room, with the flickering of lights from his space projector, I never thought I would have felt this bad.

"Mama is still the same."

"Same as in she trusts you still when she shouldn't?" I ask, entering the room after leaving my shoes at his door. "Then yes," I hiss. "She's the same."

Wicked's jaw clenches as he stares down at Wolf. "You fucking kept him from me, Ruby?"

"Shhh!" I snap, grabbing his arm and wincing when his warmth collides with my cold palm. Dragging him out of the bedroom, I wait until I've closed the door until I look up at him.

That guilt comes through tenfold when I see the pain in his eyes. A man who has never so much as explored the probability of emotions, yet I've

just stolen them from him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I just—I didn’t know where you were or what I would say to you.”

“You and I both know that is bullshit!” he snaps, his fists clenching at his sides as he paces down the long hallway. He stops outside the door that leads to where his bedroom used to be, right across from mine. The room where we slept together for the first time ever.

I follow him as Poppy slips behind me, and before I can tell her not to wake Wolf, his door is closed. Sighing, I continue to where Wicked stands, his back to me and his arm resting on the doorframe of his old bedroom.

“I agree I didn’t handle it the best I could. But I didn’t know how else to do it. Papa died”—I quote the word *died* with an eye roll—“and I had to quickly step into his shoes. I didn’t know where you were or if you even got out. Wicked, the last fucking time I saw you, you kidnapped me and let people drug me in a fucking maze!”

He snaps, his hand is on my throat and I’m being shoved against the wall. He peers down at me, and I watch as his eyes harden. Gone is the pain I saw moments ago, and hello wrath. “You could have told me as soon as you saw me tonight.”

I level my eyes on him, unwilling to give him the pleasure of showing pain. “Who’s to say that I wasn’t going to?”

“Oh, I don’t know...” He squeezes further and I feel my cheeks inflate. “Maybe the fact that you tried to run.” He shoves me backward, pointing at me with his finger. “He is mine as much as he’s yours, and from now on, Ruby? That’s exactly how this is going to play out.” He storms down the grand stairs as I massage my throat, leaning back against the wall and breathing through the will to bite back. My eyes rest on the bedroom in front of me, seeing it exactly as it was all those years ago. The familiar bed he fucked me on, the desk—sheets even. I growl out and grab the door handle, slamming it closed.

Shutting off not just those memories, but the pain that comes from them.

I didn’t know how I was going to break it to Wolf when he grew up anyway. *Oh hey, buddy, so your father is too fucked up to know.* I knew that wasn’t going to work because I’m just as fucked up as Wicked.

My phone blares off in my pocket as I make my way back downstairs where I hear men talking. No doubt with Wicked.

“What?” I snap down the phone.

“I know it’s late, and I know that you don’t work weekends, but you need to come back to the clubhouse. Victor needs to finish his conversation, and there has been a new development.”

Sighing, I end the call, when I see Ma standing near Wicked, her arms crossed. They look deep in conversation. Ma is even doing that thing where her eyes are watering and the wrinkle between them is prominent. Wicked softens for Ma. He always has.

“I have to go,” I say to both of them. “They need me back at the clubhouse.”

“Ruby!” Wicked barks, and I stop just short of the front door, my feet cemented to the floor. “You are not going back to my fucking clubhouse flashing your ass around a bunch of horny fucking bikers.”

I turn slowly, my arms crossing in front of my chest. “I don’t take orders from you, Wicked. I’m not one of your little club sluts.” Snatching my jacket hanging on the hooks near the front door, I shove it over my shoulders and take the steps two at a time.

“Come on, Menace.” Val opens the driver’s door to the G-Wagon. I pause, tilting my head to the side before sidestepping and walking down the side, toward the garage. “Oh, come on! Please don’t make my job hard!” Jogging down the steps, I ignore the creeping feeling of someone chasing me trickling down my spine as I beep the garage door with the keys in my pocket and slide beneath the glass before it’s completely open. Grabbing the keys to my pastel orange Aston Martin DB 11, a rush of adrenaline rushes through me and I squeal as I lift the door up and slam it closed, locking it just as Wicked slams his palms onto the passenger window.

He points. “Open this fucking door, Ruby!”

I flip him off. “No.” The dash lights come to life and I rev her purring engine a few times before tapping the gear into drive and zipping out of the show garage and past the waiting Mercedes that Val had idling for me.

The wired gates are already open as I floor it onto the road, my Bluetooth hooked to the radio.

Letting out a sigh of relief as my heartbeat levels out in my chest, I look into the rearview mirror to see not just the Mercedes, but single headlights not far from behind him. I don’t know what I expected with Wicked coming back into my life. Did I think it would be hard? Sure. He is a hard man to be around, and I’m not an easy woman, but not like this.

The little green phone starts dancing across my LED dash and I hit the phone button on the steering wheel. “I don’t want a lecture.”

“I know. But damn. Are you both going to be this toxic the entire time?”

“Val, you didn’t know us back then. You don’t know what he has done to me. Me keeping Wolf from him for four years is nothing.”

“Lala,” Val warns. “You know we’ve got to keep these things in-house. We don’t want it getting out that you have a loose end.”

“He’s not just a loose end, Val. These men? This club? They’re anything but, and aside from that, Wicked—” I pause, wondering how I should say the next words or even say them at all. Because did Val know? Does anyone know about Wicked being a made man? I find myself closing in around the secret, not wanting anyone to know. “It doesn’t matter,” I say instead. “Just enjoy the ride.” I press the red phone button and pick up speed. Twenty minutes later, I’m pulling down the familiar street and stopping outside the wired gates. It’s not as busy as it was the last time I was here, as if after we left the party emptied out. Honestly, what the fuck were they thinking throwing a party with a pile of bodies in their backyard anyway? The gates part open for me instantly, and I floor it faster through the gate, parking right at the front of the clubhouse. Jade, Silver, and the blonde—the blonde who really needs a name, I think Jade called her Sloane—are all inside.

Sliding out with only one foot out, a loud bike rumbles to a stop beside me, and I watch as Wicked rolls off his bike, tossing his helmet onto the ground.

“The fuck did I say to you, Ruby?”

Rolling my eyes, I climb out of the car and slam the door down. “Leave me alone, Wicked.” Shoving him out of the way, I pause when I notice everyone watching us from the entry.

“You both need to behave while we sort through this shit!” Papa juts his finger between the two of us.

Lion, the president, gestures into the clubhouse. “Ruby, you can come into church. What we need to discuss involves you—”

“—the fuck?” Wicked argues, and Lion curves a brow at him before going to Royce.

I ignore them all, nodding to Lion in passing. I don’t have the patience for Wicked tonight. Not when I’ve already maxed out on my energy. Fucking hours ago.

Brushing past the few bikers who are still here, if they don't move away from me entirely, I catch Jade and Poppy's eyes from across the room. It's as though my movements are in slow motion when Poppy leans into Jade and whispers something into her ear. Jade's eyes widen in shock before she smiles sadly at Sloane.

I tuck my hair behind my ear and follow Lion through a side door adjacent to the bar. There's a long rectangle table in the middle with their MC emblem carved into the wood expertly. Leather chairs are pushed beneath the table, and at the very head there's a gavel sitting on a tiny stand. I guess that's where Lion sits. On the wall behind the head, there's an old motorbike hanging by anchors. No windows, and honestly, it smells like ass in here more than out there.

"Take the chair there, Ruby." Lion gestures to the chair on the opposite end of the table. I carefully pull it out and lower myself down.

"Can we hurry this along, please? I have to wake up in the morning and take my son Christmas shopping." I follow Lion's movements as he passes the chair I assumed he would sit on, but he instead takes the spot to the right. Everyone else piles in, and I watch as one by one, they take their place around the table. Royce opposite Lion, and Khaos beside Royce, and so on. I don't care enough about the other members to know their names.

I feel him enter before I see him. The whole atmosphere shifts, and I don't know if that's because of the tension between us or because I genuinely hate him, but the second he's in the room, it's as though his shadow has me in a chokehold. He's the dark cloud that hovers over me any time I'm around him. The first thing I notice is that there are no extra seats.

The second thing is that he takes the one at the head of the table. He lowers himself slowly, and just as he's about to sit, his head tilts up slightly and the corner of his mouth curls into a hateful smirk.

Within a flash it's gone, and he leans back on his chair, his eyes directly on me. Slowing my breathing so I don't look like I'm panicking, I cross my legs from under the table, now cursing Lion for placing me here.

Unable to maintain the electricity that prickles over my skin any time his eyes are on mine, I pull away and look to Papa, who is seated to my right. "What is happening?"

It's the first time I've really looked at Papa. His skin is more withered than the last time I saw him, whether that be from the timeless monster or from stress. But his eyes—they've never changed.

He turns to me, taking my hand with his and pausing when his finger hovers over the diamond rock on my finger. He looks down slightly toward Wicked at the end of the table. I don't know if he knows I caught it, but I did.

I pull my hand away from his touch. "Papa!"

"This doesn't directly involve the MC, I just needed a secure place to bring you to where I knew neither of us would be in harm's way." Searching his eyes, I wait for more. "The envelope Wicked gave you to give to me all those years ago was confirmation that we had an inside leak." He stops talking as if to find his next words. "Someone who we thought we could trust but has been working undercover with the Irish."

I wince.

"What was that?" Wicked interrupts from the head of the table, and all heads turn to him.

"What was *what*?" I bite, wishing I had a cigarette or anything to keep my fingers busy enough to not want to fly across this table and claw my way into his eyeballs.

"That twitch you just did when Victor mentioned the Irish?" He leans forward, resting his arms on the table. I've been trying to ignore his obvious tattoo at the side of his throat. The only one I can see, though, and I know it won't be his only one. A rose, but instead of a flower at the top, it's a diamond. "What was it?"

Khaos chuckles, sliding a cigarette between his lips. I tilt forward and snatch it from him between my fingers, ignoring his fallen smile. Biting it into my mouth, I lower myself back onto the chair. "I don't know, Wicked. You seem to know more about me than me..." Flicking the ash off the tip, I smirk as I bring it to my lips. "Why don't you tell me what it meant?"

His eyes fly between my mouth and the cigarette in my hand before I ignore him and turn back to Papa. "Who?"

"A soldier. Young. Hence the ten body count in the shed." My brows pull together before I can conceal my thoughts with my poker face. I clear my throat and inhale another dose of nicotine.

"Oops."

"What the fuck do you mean 'oops'?" Wicked growls from the other side of the room.

"Well..." I shuffle in my chair, wishing I had alcohol for the next words I'm going to say. "I was fucking Jeremy's long-lost grandson. He had plans

to take him under, but I kind of—killed him. He was a pig and tried to steal from me.”

“Jesus Christ—” Papa pushes back on the table, his chair rolling backward slightly. “Well, that makes sense why they tried blowing up this spot. Jeremy and I, we will fix this. Ruby, what else have you been doing since?”

“Yeah, Ruby?” Wicked’s muscles on the side of his jaw tense. “Who else? Russians too?”

I smile cruelly at him. “And how did Wicked know this? You literally only just met him when he was young. After he offed his daddy dearest—if that was even real.” Wicked chuckles from his spot and the hairs on the back of my neck stand. I don’t pay him any attention. “How? How could he know?”

Papa’s cheeks widen, the corners of his eyes crinkling in a way that I know the next thing he says is not going to be something I like. “Bubba, Wicked is the Cosa Nostra.”

Turning my head to face Wicked again, I ignore the silence that vibrates around the table. There’s a shadow of doubt that hovers over the room. Maybe it’s because I just found out Papa has been lying to us so now I don’t trust him, or maybe it’s something else. But right now, I feel it in my gut. They’re hiding information from me.

“Want to tell me why?”

Wicked smirks, flashing his perfect dimple that reminds me of Wolf. “Victor picking up Poppy and me that night wasn’t a rescue, Ruby.” His fingers wrap around a cigar that’s lying in front of him. “It was a retrieval.”

“Hmmm.” I turn back to Papa. “What family? And if you say ours, I’ll kill you both.”

Papa’s eyes widen slightly before he leans back in his chair. “No, Ruby. My grandson isn’t the product of incest. Jesus fucking Christ,” he breathes out. “The Amante family.”

I pale, fear grazing its sharp talons down the base of my heart. “Amante?” Everyone knows about the Amante family. A tragic tale of love being in the wrong hands. “The Lost Family?”

Papa nods his head slowly. “Aiy, Bubba.” He turns and I follow his eyes to Wicked.

“I didn’t know they had a kid.”

Wicked grins so wide he flashes his straight white teeth. It's the first time that I've noticed the mafia in him. It never made sense, why Papa would make him a made man. It went against all of the rules and commandments.

"So why are you here? Playing biker?" I ask, running my palms down my thighs. Does he remember what happened to his family? Probably not. I read one time that trauma tends to drown out memories.

"Because they're my family and I don't give a fuck how it looks like on the outside. The Irish knew that, and that's why they came here. They knew about Wolf before I fucking knew about Wolf, Ruby, and they knew I was his father. You getting your pussy wet almost cost lives."

"I hate you."

Lion interrupts, "I know this is a family affair, but this MC isn't exactly conventional and doesn't stick to the norm. Having Wicked as a member, we always thought was going to be a short-term thing, but—"

—"but I've decided to keep the patch. This is my family now, not the Cosa Nostra. I ain't interested in it."

"But you're a made man." I sneer. "Blood in, blood out."

"I can do both." He stubs out his cigar. "When needed anyway."

"And why did Papa have to fake his own death?"

Papa stands from his chair and makes his way to the corner of the room. He's agitated, I can see it in his eyes. "Because the family that killed his knows about my involvement with him as a boy. It's complicated, principessa. I'll handle all the details."

"Of course. He's Sergio Amante's son." I chuckle, shaking my head and running my fingers through my hair, shifting it to the side. "Sergio was an elder, the Capo Dei Capi of the Commission which—" I rest my elbow on the table, massaging my forehead. "Makes sense why Gio and Marcu were scared of him. It also makes sense now how close you and Papa are. Can't believe I didn't see it before." I gulp past the swell in my throat. It tastes a lot like betrayal and cigarettes. "So Papa faked his death because the family who took yours out now wants his blood because they've found out that you're alive..." I shoot up from the table. "Do they know you have a son?"

Wicked bares his teeth. "I barely knew I had a son. Sit your ass down."

My body instantly lowers. "So who is it? Who is it that killed your family? We can take them out."

Wicked shifts his head over his shoulder slightly to look at Papa behind him. There's information they're both keeping from me. That's obvious and not a surprise. Both of them have been joined at the hip since the beginning. I don't know why I was surprised to hear that Papa wasn't really dead. No body. No other explanation but that there was a shooting and he was the fatality. How dumb and naive, so wrapped up in my grief to ask questions.

"I am coming home tonight, Bubba. You can step down." The corners of his eyes wrinkle.

"Good luck taking that from her. From what I hear, she's been having far too good of a time out there, leaving a blood trail behind her." Wicked's eyes are on mine, darkening.

"Jealous, lover?"

"Fuck you," he whispers, winking at me.

"Jesus..." Royce mutters, looking between the two of us. "Well, we need to handle this impending war."

"Agreed." I find Lion. "And thank you all for taking this on. We are forever in your debt."

"They know that, Ruby!"

I ignore the child at the head of the table. "So, who is the family that is about to be the new Lost Family?"

There's silence before Papa murmurs, "Volkov."

All of the blood leaves my veins, but I keep my eyes locked on him. "Okay."

"What was that?" Wicked bites again, and I've had enough. I push up from the chair I'm sitting on. "Ruby!"

Papa's silence is loud enough, because he knows. He knows what this means to me. Because he has known all along.

I play with the ring on my finger. "My fiancé."

"Your fucking what?" He pushes up from his chair, the muscles in his arms rippling. "Everyone the fuck out! Now!" Bodies move out of the room. "You too, old man!"

Papa kisses the top of my head in passing. "I'm sorry, Bubba. It was time that he knew."

"I know..." The air tightens around me, and when the door clicks closed, the urge to run claws its way up the base of my back.

"So you're telling me you've been in bed with my fucking enemy?"

"I didn't know who killed the Lost Family!"

“Wolf’s family, Ruby. They killed Wolf’s family, and when they find out that he is mine, what do you think they’re going to do to him, hmm?” It’s not until he finishes his last words that I realize how close he is to me.

I step backward. “I didn’t know, Wicked, I promise. I didn’t.” Saying his name never felt weird on the tip of my tongue, it’s as if it belongs there.

He backs me up against the table, his fingers wrapping around my chin. Sucking in deep breaths, I try to keep myself balanced by squeezing the edge of the wood. “You’re everything I fucking hate in this world, Ruby.”

“Then why are you so close to me?”

Leaning closer, his lips hover above mine. I hold my breath when they graze over mine. “Close enough to kill you.”

I smirk, looking between his eyes and his lips. “Or fuck me.”

He chuckles, arching his hips into me and I fight a groan when his cock rubs against my stomach. “Never again.” Then he shoves me backward and makes his way to the door. Before he can leave, he turns over his shoulder. “I expect an invite to the wedding. Oh, and Ruby? You take my kid anywhere near him and I’ll kill you.” He storms out and I let out a long-held breath. My throat swells and I lean over the table, squeezing my eyes closed. He’ll never forgive me for this, I know that, but somewhere deep in the back of my mind, I think I wanted him to fight harder. Harder for me? I don’t know.

My steps are slow when I finally exit the room. “He’ll forgive you, baby.” Papa usually calms the fire that’s in my veins. “You and he are inevitable. Everyone knows that.”

Shaking my head, I swipe the tears that fell down my cheek before I could catch them. “No, Papa. He won’t. Why?” I narrow my eyes on him. “Why didn’t you tell me it was Mikhail Volkov’s father who ordered that kill?”

“Would it have mattered, Bubba? You and I both know that there’s no way out of that.”

Sighing, I start making my way outside.

“Where are you going?”

I turn around and study him. I’ve trusted him all of my life, but I can’t get rid of the itch in the back of my head that knows he’s hiding something from me. “You’re back now. I can go back to being my age.”

“Ruby,” he says gently, but I ignore him and the stares coming from everyone else.

Val is standing on the other side of my Aston Martin, wiggling his brows. “You can’t get rid of me now.”

I slide into the driver’s seat. “I don’t even care at this point.” I had thought about the day that Wicked would come home multiple times over the years. They all played out differently in my head. But not even I could think up what just happened.

I start up the car, looking out the window to catch him with Sloane on his lap, her legs wrapped around his waist and their mouths on each other.

I wince.

“I’m sorry, principessa,” Val murmurs softly as I put the car into drive and floor it forward.

“Don’t be. I’ve got my life back now that Papa is back.”

“Partly...” Val interferes. “Since you are engaged to be married in a month.”

I swallow the bile rising in my throat. “Yeah. I guess.”

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Wicked

Sloane rubs her ass into my crotch and I pull back, staring up at her. “Go with Jade and Poppy.”

“But am I staying with you tonight?” she whines, running her finger down my neck and over the tattoo on the side.

I move away from her slightly. “Nah, you can stay with Roy.” I tap her away and she follows Jade through to the back of the clubhouse. I’m trying to keep it right since it’s Jade’s friend, and I’d be lying if I said Sloane wasn’t helpful when it came to pissing off Ruby, but my dick is bored. Now that I have my son to think about too, everything has changed.

“We all staying at your hotel?” Royce asks, dropping down onto the chair beside mine. “Everyone’s at the barn, helping burn it to the ground.” I can smell the burning flesh and metal from here; he didn’t have to say a fucking word. “You alright?”

“No,” I answer honestly, reaching over the bar and grabbing the first bottle my fingers land on. “I think I’m fucking cursed.”

Royce chuckles deeply, taking the bottle of some cheap whiskey off me and wrapping his lips around the tip. “Nah, man. You’ve just found your curse. There’s a difference.”

“Fuck. I can’t be a dad, Royce. The fuck? Me?”

When he doesn’t answer, I shift my seat to face him. “The shit I’ve done?”

“No offense.” Royce swipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “But I’m going to go right ahead and say that his mother has done worse.” I ignore the cut through my chest at the mention of Ruby. Fuck, if she isn’t everything I despise. The only problem is that I don’t.

“It has been years since I had seen her, bro. And every bitch I fucked after her didn’t exist in my head,” I say low, under my breath. “I knew the second I was inside her that there would be no one walking this earth powerful enough to replace the way she felt around my dick.”

Royce barks out a laugh, smacking me on my back. “Well, shit. You know you’ve scared the shit out of the brothers and girls with how you’ve acted since she’s been around. Seen a whole new side to you. One I don’t think any of us expected.”

I kick out my feet, bringing my eyes to his. “I wanna throw her on a level...”

Royce pauses, the bottle an inch from his mouth. “She’s fucking hot, I get that—and if you tell Jade I said so, I’ll deny it—but I can’t be in on that game, brother. You know I’m dicked down.”

I raise my brows at him, my mouth curving into a smirk. “I wasn’t asking you to be joining. Don’t get jealous.”

Royce scratches the bridge of his nose. “Khaos?”

Flicking the lid to the bottle, I nod. “Yeah.”

“You sure?” Royce asks carefully. “I mean, he’s young and has already spoken about her on numerous occasions. He’d be like a dog in heat with all that.”

I stifle a laugh. “She’s getting married, I’ve just got to make sure it’s my dick she’s thinking about when he’s inside her.”

“Damn. Would really love to be a part of this.”

I spend the next two days with Royce, casing out the new L’artisanant in Chicago. I think deep down, Royce just doesn’t want to leave. I flat-out don’t want him to. Having another L’artisanant isn’t hard to open or operate. We have been in this business for a long time and have people lining up to be employed here. Some come from home, others we gauge from here. Having it on the upper level of my hotel helps. The hotel my

parents left along with the trust fund. The trust fund I couldn't touch until everything came out.

Pushing open the doors that lead into the club, I stop at the threshold, seeing the dark marble walls and mirrored ceiling.

"Looks good," Royce says from beside me, and we both make our way to the bar where Orson and Storm are. Storm is now some hot-shot coding genius and Orson plays professional basketball.

"This might be better than the one in San Fran..." Orson looks at me from over his glass, staring down the girl behind the bar.

"Agreed." The theme of L'artisanant isn't for the weak-hearted. Every level, the kink intensifies. Level one is usually where people hover, level three is where Royce stays, but then... he has a limit. They all know I've never been lower than four.

"Opening tonight." Storm sinks the rest of his drink, his eyes shifting between Royce and me. "What's happened?"

"Nothing," I answer before Royce can interfere. "But I need your help with something. I'll send you over his name, and I want to know everything there is to know."

"He has a kid," Royce smirks from behind his glass.

I glare at him. "Asshole."

"What!" He raises his hands up. "It hasn't opened yet. We can still talk about our lives for"—he looks down at his watch—"about forty minutes."

"Damn," Storm answers, shaking his head. "I don't wish I was you."

"Yeah, you do." Royce chuckles under his breath.

"Both of you shut the fuck up."

Pushing up from the chair, I head to the escalators behind the bar that take you up to the second level. Each side of the escalator is encased by glass display rooms. In every room, people will be inside, performing. Fucking. Whatever.

I bring the glass to my mouth, moving through level two. A direct replica of level one, only flipped so the bar is toward the back. Booths line parts of the large area, with cages floating up ahead. The walls are a deep red, the furnishings all chrome. Staff are moving around, prepping for opening. I head to the back and up the escalator to level three, with the same display on either side. The walls are a milky shade of beige with mirrored ceilings again and the bar toward the side. The booths are a little

less private now, with a light in every area to show silhouettes. There are also options to take one of the private rooms off to the side.

I stop at the bottom of the escalator to level four. Tomorrow is the first day I get to meet Wolf, since Ruby wanted to take it a tad slower into letting him know what's happening. I don't want to be drinking all fucking night. Aside from Ma telling her she needs to go out for a couple of nights and blow off some steam after taking over Victor's job for years, I know that it'll take more than that to get little Ruby La Rosa out of the house.

The escalator leads me up to level four. White walls, bar furnishings, and leather sofas are scattered around the room. LED lights line each sofa, where poles are lined throughout the room. Chairs are placed casually, and the whole back wall is a mirror, as well as the ceiling. No private rooms here. This is a free-for-all space. The last time someone got lost on level four, they went crying to the police, trying to press charges. It didn't work. You sign an NDA and your rights away the second you set foot through L'artisanant .

I make my way to the bar, where a young girl around Poppy's age is lining up the bottles against the cabinet. She spins around and jumps when she sees me. "Shit! Sorry!"

"You all ready up here?"

"Yes," she answers, and my eyes fall to her name tag. Cassie. "We're ready."

"How old are you?" I ask, not hiding the way my eyes crawl over her body.

Her cheeks turn pink. "Twenty-three."

"Alright..." I'll double check that shit. She looks young as fuck, but then we do that. We find the young ones because they make good bait for the creeps that Anonymous hunt.

I grab my phone out of my pocket, swiping it unlocked when I see Victor's name flash over the screen.

"What's up?"

"We're going to need to talk this week about something that has come up."

I lower myself down onto one of the chairs. A glass slides over to me and I look up at Cassandra, who smiles at me. Way too fucking innocent for this club. Fuck. What was Storm thinking? "Tell me now."

“It’s about your commitments to the Cosa Nostra. They want you where your father was.”

I swig the whiskey in my mouth, hissing when it burns down my throat, leaving notes of honey and smoke behind. “Figured that was coming.”

“I know you said the MC is your life now, but son...”

“I know,” I answer, giving him what he wants while looking up at the ceiling. “I know. I just need time to train Khaos to take my place. I can’t be leaving them, and I can’t leave Royce and Lion in the dark about it either. I’ll need to fill them in.” Usually mafia business is to be left just in-house. No one outside.

“I agree. They need to know. The fact is, Wolf isn’t a La Rosa, he’s an Amante. Your family isn’t lost anymore, Vittorio.” I sink the rest of the drink in one go.

“Alright. Talk soon.” Hanging up, I flick through my messages. I pause when I find the Instagram logo on my phone. *I wonder.* I tap it open and type in her name. It comes up first. I blink at her username. **Uncut.** I know she means gems, but it still irks me for a reason I’m not touching.

Her profile is public, so I click on it. Twelve thousand followers, following six. I chuckle, shaking my head. “Always a fucking snob.”

I click on the last photo she uploaded. A selfie of her holding up the phone in the driver’s seat of her Aston Martin, wearing a tight little black dress with her tits spilling out and hair flattened straight. I roll my eyes when I see the girl beside her is Betty. They’re both dressed to go out, and I look at the date it was posted.

Forty-six minutes ago.

I narrow my eyes and fight with myself not to open the comments. Scrolling to the next photo, it’s a photo of her and Wolf. My heart slows in my chest and I fight back the urge to not get in my car and get them both right now. Wolf is laughing in her arms but looking directly at the camera and whoever is holding it. Ruby is blowing raspberries into his neck. They look like they’re in the snow, both dressed in ski gear. That was posted a couple months ago. I scroll to the next one and my blood turns cold.

She’s sitting at a restaurant table, her makeup immaculate and she’s wearing a tight little white dress. Fuck. Mikhail is seated beside her, dressed in a suit, his beard shaved perfectly. His hand is on her thigh, his eyes on the camera. I study the photo obsessively. Her eyes look dull, as if the glitz

and glam that she's dressed as does nothing to hide the ugliness she feels inside.

Yeah. Shit is about to change.

I scroll back to the top and hit follow.

Game on.

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Ruby

I came to the conclusion years ago that I wasn't the kind of girl who liked going out and running amok, so becoming a mother worked for me. Until it didn't when Papa died.

Since he came back two days ago, things around the house have been tense. I can feel Mama's betrayal. Why he would leave her and me to pick up all his shit while he ran off. After putting Wolf to bed, Mama insisted Betty and I head out, as she and Papa had shit to sort through. She told us both not to go home tonight, so now here I am, at the penthouse of my hotel in the city and looking directly across the road.

"You okay?" Betty comes up from behind me, handing me a drink. I take it from her, stepping backward and back into the lounge to get out of the wind.

"Yeah. Apparently, they put a bar into the hotel." I take a large swig. "I say let's check it out tonight."

Betty flops down onto the leather chair in the corner. "Of course."

There's a beep on the speaker and I jog toward the little voice box, pressing the button.

"Ma'am, we have a Jade, Poppy, and Sloane here for you?"

“Let them up. Thanks, Michelle.”

“Oh God,” Betty grumbles, kicking off her heels and curling her legs under her ass on the couch. “This really a good idea?” I fish the bottle of 42 out the back of the cupboard, grabbing a bunch of glasses.

“Yes. You’re the one who said I don’t get to go out or have a life because of the family business!” I peek my head around the corner, only seeing her dark hair spilling over the couch. The living room is all glass walls and a large patio that curves around the design. There’s a large TV hanging on the wall to the left, with a fireplace burning beneath it. Three bedrooms downstairs and the master upstairs, loft style. I’ve always loved this apartment. I loved living here before Papa passed away. I feel so stupid saying that now. Men are liars. All of them.

“True!” Betty calls out. “Well, we may as well since you’re also childless until tomorrow too.”

The elevator doors part open and Jade steps out, wearing a little red dress and black heels. Behind her is Poppy, who has her hair pulled up into a tight pony, and behind her—Sloane. Her blonde hair is left wild over her shoulders, her blue eyes bright. I went big with my makeup tonight. Smoked-out eyes with sharp wings, beige lips, and deep bronzer and foundation. I am out for a good time, not a long time, so may as well look good doing it.

Jade wraps her arms around me. “You look hot!”

Poppy squeezes my waist. “Are you okay? I heard Wicked lost his utter shit at you the other day.”

I shrug, sliding the glasses over the black marble counter. “Just like old times.”

Poppy giggles, swooping up the glass and sitting on one of the barstools beside Sloane, who is still staring at me.

“Ahhh! I’ve heard so much about you two—” Betty saunters in behind me, running up to Poppy to give her a hug. “Hey, kid. Long time...”

Jade and Sloane say hello to Betty, who ignores Sloane. I know she’s being a good friend, and part of her doing that is waiting for Sloane and me to talk. She’s following my lead.

“Look,” Sloane breathes out. “Jade is my best friend and I don’t want this to be weird, so can we put everything out on the table.”

I take a small sip of 42. “Sure.” I’ve dealt with men three times her size and had guns pointed at my head, knives grazed over my skin. She doesn’t

scare me one bit, but bless her for thinking so.

Sloane tucks her hair behind her ear. “It’s true, I am seeing Wicked.”

I blink slowly, the corner of my mouth curving in a small smirk.

“What’s funny?” She catches my smirk, her eyes narrowing.

“Ahh...” Jade grabs her by the arm.

I shake my head at Jade before going back to Sloane. “It’s just amusing to me that you think you’re seeing him.”

“Why?” Sloane whips her head back, clearly offended. “I get you have the whole badass, sexy vixen, mafia bitch thing going on, but I have been sleeping with him for years now.”

“Umm—” Poppy interferes, but I shake my head slightly at her.

“It’s amusing, Sloane, because I’ll tell you why.”

“Oh God,” Poppy murmurs in tune with Betty.

I lower my drink to the counter, resting my eyes on Sloane. I want to watch her squirm when the words leave my mouth. “When you have his attention, and I mean all of it, you’ll know, because with Wicked, he needs to own you. All of you. Every animalistic tendency that man has comes out to play when he’s fucking you. He fucks you to own you, not to *sleep* with you.” I pause when I notice her mouth slightly part. “That’s how I know. You may think you own him, honey, but he takes no ownership of you, and judging by the fact that you have not one single bruise on your body, or scar, or even marks around your throat, that tells me that not only does he not claim you—” I feel a pang of guilt when her eyes fall to the counter. “But neither does the monster that lives inside of him. The monster *I* know.”

Silence falls around us and I look to Jade whose lips are curled behind her teeth.

Sloane grabs the glass that I filled for her, shooting it back. I wait for her to answer, and how she answers is going to tell me whether or not either of us can move on. “I already knew.”

Jade sighs, her shoulders relaxing.

“God, I don’t know. I just—I got caught up. I am caught up—” Her eyes catch mine. “I’m not blind or stupid. I see what you both have, but make no mistake, I owe you no loyalty. If that man grabs me and wants to use me to get you jealous, I’ll fall to him straight away.”

I hold her stare, my brows slightly raised. Minus two points in my book for self-respect. “And I need you to know that you admitting that to me just

now means that I won't get jealous."

"Also, I'm sorry! But, bitch, she is his *only* one!" Betty pops off. "You may not have known us back then, but there is no one else but her and Wicked. Wicked and Ruby. You're deluded! And also!" Betty snaps, as if just remembering. "The mother of his fucking kid! The greatest kid!"

Sloane shrugs. "Still doesn't change my mind."

"Sloane," Jade warns, but Sloane already has her hand in her pocket, grabbing a bag filled with white powder. Jade looks between the bag and me. I don't care so long as it's away from my kid and it comes nowhere near my nose.

Poppy takes the rolled-up bill from Sloane. "What?" Poppy glares at me. "It's just coke."

"No, Poppy..."

Poppy widens her eyes at me, a small smile on her little mouth. "You just spoke about my brother's sex in front of me. This is for my trauma."

"Oh God." I flick the lid off the bottle of 42, gazing up at Betty briefly. Her mouth is in a flat line, her brow arched high. I know that look. By the time this night is over, Betty's fist is going to be in Sloane's face.

"You want a bump?" Sloane stares up at me with the rolled bill up her nose.

"No thanks." I take in her outfit before resting back on her face. "I know where it comes from."

"Show me your house, girl!" Jade jumps up from the barstool, her arm hooking in mine. I walk us through to the lounge before taking her straight for the stairs that lead up to the master. As soon as we're far enough away, Jade squeezes my arm.

"I am so sorry about her."

"Don't be. If I had to apologize every time Betty did something shady, I'd never stop apologizing." I laugh, leading her through the master room. A floating bed is in the middle of the room, a mirror ceiling at the top. The bathroom is tucked to the back, and the whole front of the room is glass. There's a sliding door that leads out to the patio that opens out and overlooks the busy city streets.

Sliding open the door, I walk out to the patio, brushing my hair away from the strong winds. "You know, I've known Wicked a long time," Jade murmurs from behind me, and when I turn slightly over my shoulder, I catch her leaning on the threshold to the door. I don't bother to tell her that

I've known him longer. That whatever she thinks she knows about him is nothing compared to who he really is. How dark and twisted his morals were when he first met me, and the games he played to get to me. "He has always been quiet. Somewhat distant to what the others were like." She pushes off the door and joins me on the patio. I look out to the hotel opposite us, noticing the lights at the very top flickering on.

"But I've never seen him the way he is with you."

I chuckle, my thumb drawing circles on my forearm to distract myself from the memories. "That's nothing compared to what he used to be like. And I don't just mean that in a good way."

"Hey!" Poppy interrupts from behind. Before Wolf, she was probably the only thing Wicked and I agreed on. "Shall we go?"

"Nope." I make my way back through my room and down the stairs. I can feel Poppy hot on my tail, but it's not until I'm back in the kitchen that I finally turn to face her.

"I thought we were going out!"

"We—" I gesture around the room. "Are. But you can't come into the place we're going to unless you want your brother to drag us both out by our hair, and I don't know about you, but I took a great deal of time doing it tonight."

Poppy blinks, crossing her arms in front of her. "I'm still coming. He can deal with it."

I shrug, ignoring the way Betty and Sloane are icing each other across the counter. "Fine."

The elevator takes us to the bottom level of the hotel, and our heels clink as we walk across the marble floor. Val is standing near the door, a grin bright on his face.

"I've gotta say, you all look amazing tonight."

I roll my eyes as he saddles up beside Sloane.

"Where we going?" he asks, putting a cigarette behind his ear. "No offense, but Paps doesn't want you venturing too far. Says it's not safe and that we're close to going into lockdown."

I snatch his cigarette off him and wait on the sidewalk of the busy street. People enter through the doors at the hotel across the street. Cars zip past and I hear Val's heavy footsteps run up behind me. "Nah uh! I don't think—" I cross the road between cars, making my way to the entrance doors.

Brushing past the bellmen, I make my way to the elevators, turning to see the rest of the girls and a stroppy Val not far behind.

I push the button on the elevator, my eyes drifting up to the corner of the room where a camera is staring back down at me. The doors open and we all pile into the small space. Once the doors close, Val turns to face me.

“Ruby. I’m serious. Right now is not the time to play, especially since Mikhail is on his way back from Russia. Why can’t you just drink in the penthouse?” I ignore his talking, especially when it comes to talking about Mik and Russia. Alcohol has warmed my blood, and all I can feel is the electricity in my veins. I’ve had to watch him dance around Sloane twice with his tongue down her throat.

“What is this place?” Jade asks, the doors parting open. I make my way through to the main bar. People are scattered around the place, music playing softly. It has an intimate vibe to it. There are more lounges than I would have expected, with it being a bar, but whatever.

Betty hooks her arm with mine, dragging me away from the group, just as Jade looks up at the signage, pausing. Her mouth drops open, all color leaving her face as she steps backward.

“Jade!” I call out from over my shoulder, but it’s too late. Betty’s grip is unmatched.

Chuckles into the side of Betty’s neck, “I’m taking someone home tonight since Mik is on his way home and no doubt I won’t be allowed out until the wedding.”

“We’re going to talk about that wedding later, but yes, I agree. We’re both taking someone home tonight, so can we please ditch the bitch?”

We follow the path behind the bar until we see an escalator. “Weird.” We step on, catching the live sex show on either side. “Holy fuck... it’s a fucking sex club?” Nothing happens in Chicago without me saying so, so the fact that this club managed to sneak undetected already annoys the shit out of me.

“Okay, this is my vibe!” Betty dances. “We need a drink. Let’s go to the bar here before touring the place.” We get off the escalator and fall deep into the busy dance floor around the bar that’s toward the back of the room this time. There’s a mixture of people. Some suits, some young.

Betty shoves a glass of—I don’t know—into my chest and we continue around, passing private rooms with moaning and the sound of skin slapping together.

“I feel like it’s getting worse. Let’s go up!” Betty points to the sky as our heels tap onto the escalator. We move through level three when we see there’s a level four.

“This annoys me. How did they manage to open this fucking bar without me knowing about it? It would take months, if not years, to plan this kind of thing!” As soon as we hit level four, the music shifts to a smooth beat. I swallow my entire drink and drag Betty into the room. This time the walls are beige white, the leather couches white and scattered booths fill the area. There’s a small group of people dancing in the center of the room and I drag Betty toward them, my mind spinning from the alcohol and intoxicating sound of Lithe. I can worry about who’s running this place later. Right now, I want to get lost. Forget. Everything and everyone.

Betty has refilled our drinks at least five times, and this time Lithe’s “Wish They Seen My Face” plays. I love his music and I allow his familiar sound to entrance me. Going out and not being approached by men isn’t unusual for me. For the most part, people know who I am, and if they don’t, someone they’re with knows who I am. No one approaches me—I go to them.

I open my eyes to a young guy dressed in a pretty button-up and jeans, his drink resting against his bottom lip.

Smirking, I take a step toward him. *Yes. You are coming home with me.*

A hand slams over my lower belly, unmoving, and I look down to see tanned skin with tattoos leading up his arm. *Fuck.* My heart rate picks up as he slams me backward and I collide with his chest.

He drags his nose down the curve of my neck. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” I continue dancing against him, the smirk on my face too smug. I don’t even bother to ask what he’s doing here. Obviously, that’s who Jade saw earlier when she stopped walking in. She may bow and abide by the rules her old man lays out for her, but I’m no biker’s woman. I’m the reason a biker doesn’t want one.

Spinning around in his grip, I tilt my head up at him and force my spit down my throat when I see what he’s wearing. Gone is Wicked; standing in front of me is an Amante royalty in all his glory.

“Such a shame,” I say from behind a half-smile. “You’ve always looked so damn good in a suit.” When my finger touches his cheek, his hand flies up and he stops it.

His hair is done in a way that doesn't look done, his lips curling in a sneer. "What the fuck are you doing here, Ruby?"

"Whatever I want," I answer, forcing my wrist out of his grip and stepping closer to him. Leaning up on my tippy toes, I bring my lips to his ear. "Sloane is downstairs, by the way." I shuffle backward out of his space before turning back around and making my way to the young guy still watching me from the bar. Before my fingers can wrap around his collar, an arm is around my waist and I'm being dragged backward. It's not until we're inside a small booth at the back of the room, when he finally puts me down. The lighting is darker back here, but little LED strips line the leather sofas. I think we can see other people more than they can see us.

Wicked's arm is above my head, resting in the glass wall that separates the booths. My breathing hikes up a notch as he turns his head and I see the outline of the diamond tattoo on the side of his neck. It's black and gray. The details lined to perfection. His cheekbones are sunken, his jaw sharper than scalpels used in surgery. He towers over me like he always has, and my knees weaken. Silence. The deep baseline of the song the only sound between us both. I want to yell at him for dragging me out the way he did, but I can't seem to get the words out.

"Love You Like Me" from William Singe plays and my eyes catch Wicked's as they stop roaming my face and come to mine.

"What are you doing, Wicked?"

His hand that's pressed against the glass behind me slowly slides down until his chest is against mine. "Whatever the fuck I want." He leans down, dragging his tongue across the curve of my bottom lip, before standing straight. "You want revenge?"

"I do," I say, brow curved. It's the only thing that's distracting me since my heart has gone rogue.

He pushes off the wall, turning his head over his shoulder. I finally peek around his large arms, seeing Khaos sitting on an identical white sofa directly opposite the one that's beside us.

I look back to Wicked. "That's hardly fair trade from all of the shit you've done to me over the years."

"Yeah?" Wicked's brows shoot up. He leans in closer, his hand coming to my inner thigh. My head falls backward and I fight the groan at the back of my throat. "Need I remind you that you're marrying someone else?"

Okay, he has a point.

I look between him and Khaos. “You really think you can do this?”

“I know I can.” Wicked pushes off the glass wall, finally giving me space to breathe. Sloane sits smugly on the sofa beside us. “Let’s see who breaks who first.”

I step slowly backward, until I feel Khaos’ hands come to the front of my upper thighs. “Game on.”

Lowering myself onto a waiting Khaos, I drag my fingernail down his pretty face. Khaos is cute. Too cute for someone wearing a cut. But he does have the road name Khaos, so I guess there is that.

His baby blue eyes fall down my chest, and I reach to the back of my dress, unzipping until it falls away and my breasts are out. Thanks to my surgeon, they sit perfectly.

“Goddamn.” Khaos’ hand comes to one, his mouth to the other. I bury my fingers in his hair, my head falling back until my long hair grazes against the edge of my tailbone and I lower myself down to straddle his hips.

“You’re cute.” I ruffle his hair, and he tilts his head up at me, flashing a bright smile. I step back out of his grip, staring over my shoulder at Wicked. Sloane is on her knees in front of him, his hand buried in her hair but his focus is on me. I turn back to Khaos. “But you’re simply not going to work.” Scooping up my dress, I quickly try to make my way out of the booth, only Wicked’s arm flies out against the clear glass. I trace his tattoos with my eyes until they land on his. Fire courses through my veins at how he stares back at me.

“Where you going?”

“To find someone else to fuck.” Casting a quick glance down to the floor. “Enjoy...”

Slipping between the glass wall, I dance my way over to the bar, finding Betty and Jade already there ordering drinks. The music is louder now, the lighting even dimmer than it was when I left.

Jade forces a smile, wincing. “Did they do that thing to you too?”

I grab a shot glass and shoot it back. Betty orders more when she notices I’m going to need it. “No. Because I won’t give him the satisfaction.”

“Well.” Jade turns, leaning her elbows on the bar. “Look, there’s plenty out here.”

“No.” I take another shot, wincing past the harsh sting. “It’s going to take more than a basic boy to piss off Wicked. I can’t be bothered.” My

phone starts vibrating against my tits, and I reach in between, seeing Papa's name flashing over the screen.

"Hello?" I block one ear and make my way through the crowd, ignoring the fact that no one has left the booth. Shoving through the swinging doors into the bathroom, I hear Papa's voice come through.

"Ruby..." His voice sounds different. Strained. He never calls me by my birth name.

"What's happened?"

He breathes out loudly. "You need to come home. Both of you." My blood leaves my body and I pull the door open, taking the steps back to the bar and around to where the booth is, shoving through naked bodies. My fingers are tingling, mind spinning. Something isn't right. I can feel it.

Just as I reach the booth, Wicked slides out, a scowl on his face. When he sees me, it's gone.

"What's wrong?"

"I—" He catches me with his arm when my knees weaken. "I think something bad has happened. We have to go home. Now." Wicked's eyes search mine before he takes my hand and our fingers intertwine as he moves us through the sea of bodies. I don't see anything that he does after that. Not him telling everyone to meet us there, nothing. I don't even fight when he's shoving a helmet into my chest and starting his bike, because something is *wrong*. Whether it was Papa's tone, or my instincts, I can feel it.

Wrapping my arms around Wicked's body, I squeeze my eyes closed and inhale as the engine growls from beneath me, the wind running its rough fingers through my hair as he whips us forward. I clutch on to his torso, ignoring the memories of the last time I was on the back of a bike with him. What could have happened? Maybe it's Val. He did disappear earlier on in the night, or Gio? Shit. I can't think of any other possibilities.

When we pull down our street, police lights flash red and blue on the curbside, and news agencies have their cameras parked right outside the gate.

"What the fuck?"

Wicked's bike idles between my thighs before he squeezes the throttle and drives us through the wired gates as they part open. There's a dark car parked at the curb, with a police vehicle. Men are walking out of the house dressed in blue plastic coveralls and white booties. Before Wicked has

parked the bike, I unlatch myself from around him and fling my leg over, flying to where Papa is standing, talking with a police officer.

“Papa!”

He turns just in time to catch me, and I see all of the blood soaked into his suit shirt, smudged on his face and sticking his hair up.

“Wolf—” The words barely leave my mouth before Papa shakes me, holding my upper arms.

“No, principessa, he is with Val—” He points to where our secondary carport is and my heart rate slows, my shoulders slacking when I see him curled into Val’s big body, and watch as Wicked makes his way to them both. My plan was to take it easy, introduce them slowly, but when Wolf’s dark blond head lifts off Val and his little arms fly out to Wicked instantly, a pang of guilt grips me around my throat. “But—”

I turn back to Papa, my mind no longer racing at speeds only a parent can understand. “What is it?”

“It’s your ma.”

I step backward, the floor shifting beneath my feet. “What?”

“We don’t know anything yet—”

He cuts me off, and before I can fall backward, an arm is holding me up and I can smell Wicked’s cologne all around me.

“Mama—” Wolf’s hand rests on my cheek, swiping my tears away.

I take his little chubby hand, pressing my lips to it and resting my forehead on his. “Mam—” I choke on the words. “I’ll be okay, baby.” I turn back to my father, who is now talking with his three right-hand men, his hands buried in his pockets as the police officer he was talking with moves back inside the house.

He notices me staring and makes his way back to us, now that cops are out of earshot. “You three should head to the penthouse.”

Shaking my head, I look back to the front door of our home, the once immaculate pearl white-washed door now smudged with crimson. I flinch away. “I want to see her.”

“No, Ruby.” Papa’s voice hardens before his hand comes to my cheek to gently bring my eyes up to his. Behind the hard exterior of Victor La Rosa, I see a broken husband. As if the years that he and Mama fought meant nothing, because now he has to walk this earth soulless. “Principessa, this wasn’t only a targeted hit. It was done for this—” Papa’s eyes shift over my shoulder for a second, meaning the media outside the gate. “This is the start

of possibly the biggest war to ever become since the seventies. I need you all safe and away from here. “

Wicked’s fingers find mine. I don’t pull away from him, but I don’t back down from Papa either. “I held this fort down for years while you were gone. I can handle it!”

“No.” His tone hardens. “Now leave. I will come and see you all tomorrow.” I watch as his back retreats to Tony and Colin, his two main men. More suits arrive from the back of the house, made men, glaring at the police cars like they’re scum.

“Rubs, come on. You still keep all the keys hanging up in your garage?”

“Yeah.” I swipe the tears from my cheeks, my heart squeezing in my chest. I look up at the only window with a light on, the one that is on the third level and overlooking the driveway down below. Kissing my two fingers, I blow gently toward it and cross myself.

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Ruby

I feel lost more than loss. There's an emptiness that throbs deep in my chest, and the more that time goes on, it only widens. *I lost my mama.* The one woman who was my constant. Who I took for granted most of the time. Guilt wraps his ugly hand around my throat as my knees weaken. I barely make it through the front door of the penthouse when I fall to the floor and tears stream down my face, pain hammering against my ribcage. I reach for my dress's zipper, forcing it down and then kicking it off my body. I don't see anything. My eyes burn from searing hot pain as I squeeze them closed.

"Come on, buddy. You want a shower?"

I push up from the floor, forcing the tears off my cheeks and straightening myself just as Wicked's back is to me and he's heading upstairs.

"I—"

He pauses his steps, looking over his shoulder at me. "Don't, Ruby. Let yourself do what you need to do. I've got him." I fall to the floor as soon as Wolf is out of sight and let the pain crawl over my skin. I don't know how long I stay there, rolled into a ball and sobbing into the marble tiles. My face is wet and my eyes are puffy. It's not until I feel my body shift off the

floor and arms wrap around me that I feel the weight of time against my face. Curling into his warm chest, I rest my cheek against his neck, breathing in and out. A barrier of safety drops around me as he carries me up the stairs. The room is dim, the smell of eucalyptus misting in the air.

I sigh against his skin, pressing my lips against his chest. He stops and slowly lowers me down, until the mattress sinks beneath my weight.

“You remembered?” My voice cracks through my sadness. “About the diffuser oil.”

He doesn’t answer at first, and when my eyes finally travel up to his face, my heart squeezes in my chest. His body is roped with tight muscles, his abs deeply cut and defined. Wicked was always solid, but this is something else... The tattoos that crawl up his arm are no distraction to the masterpiece beneath them.

He lowers himself down slowly, resting his hand on his knee and turning toward me. “Yeah, I did.” He reaches toward me and my eyes close. As soon as his finger touches my temple, a shiver creeps down my spine and goose bumps rise on my flesh. “I’m sorry about Mama, baby.”

My eyes crack open slowly and I stare blankly at the art piece hanging on my wall. “They’ll get what’s coming to them.”

“Hey!” His voice hardens, but his tone remains soft. Gentle. “Look at me.” My eyes shift to his. Wicked is painfully attractive, in a way that would be considered classically handsome if not for the hardness in his eyes, the nose ring, tattoos, and... well, the scar I haven’t touched yet that’s carved into his chest. “You don’t have to be that person with me. You know that.” He and I haven’t been around each other long since reuniting, but I know. I’ve known since the first time I saw him again that I could trust him. It’s as though all of our years apart don’t exist.

“You’re the only one who sees this side of me,” I answer hoarsely, the tears now dried on my cheeks. Reaching for his hand, I suck in a deep breath when electricity zaps between us. “Stay in here tonight.”

His hand stills. “I’m not fucking you.”

I glare up at him. “Did I fucking ask you to?”

“No.” He stands from the bed, moving across the room and flicking the light off before kicking his gray sweats off. *Rude.* “But then have I ever waited for your permission?”

“No,” I say into the darkness.

“Wolf crashed as soon as I put him down. This where you guys stayed?” he asks as the mattress sinks behind me.

“We stayed at Papa’s while he was gone, but I always kept a room here for him as a—”

“—vault house. I get it.” A vault house is what we basically call a safe house. It’s a getaway house if you need one.

“We spent a lot of time here, though. Sometimes, I’d pretend that I didn’t have a whole mafioso to run. Here, I’d be able to just be Ruby La Rosa, Wolf’s mama. But out there? As soon as I left this house.”

His arm rests over my body and he pulls me into his chest. “You were Lala La Rosa, the devil in black.”

“Yes,” I whisper, shuffling farther into him. I duck my mouth behind his arm just enough to breathe the smell of his skin. Soap, nicotine, and clean detergent. “Can I ask you something?”

“You’re going to anyway,” he growls into my hair.

My eyelids turn to lead as my mouth opens. “Why did you put me in that maze?”

Sleep takes hold and sweeps me up into the darkness.

I roll onto the side to squeeze farther into Wicked, and my arm lands on a cool spot. I push up off the mattress and reach for my phone that’s already charging on the bedside table. He must have put it on there before he went to bed last night.

Last night.

Pain radiates through my heart once again, and any time I think of Mama’s face, it’s as though a knife digs deeper and deeper into my chest.

“Morning,” Wicked says from behind me, and I turn to face him.

Wolf’s little hands reach out for me and I curl my finger toward them both. Wicked lays him down on my bed and he crawls his little body over to my side, slipping beneath the blanket. “Mama sad...”

I kiss his little head, looking up at Wicked. I don’t know if it’s because so much has happened since he and I have seen each other again and he feels too guilty to grind me about keeping Wolf from him, or it’s an impending storm that he’s holding from me, but I decide not to poke the bear.

“Morning.” I smile down at Wolf. His dark eyes so much like Wicked’s, only brighter. “Hungry?”

He nods before sliding out from my blanket and over the bed. He runs his little body down the corridor. “Untle! Untle!”

“Hey, buddy...” Royce’s voice drifts through my room, and my smile falls.

“Shit—” Wicked steps in farther, closing the door behind him. “Don’t be like that.” He raises his brows at me. “You, of all people, understand the importance of family, Ruby.”

I sigh, inching up the bed and running my fingers through my dark hair, pushing it to the side. “I know. And I know how bikers are, but right now?”

“He’s family. The most family I’ve ever had that isn’t Poppy or you.”

Chewing on my bottom lip, I slide out from beneath the bed covers. “Okay. Look, I need to go see Papa—” I spin around and instantly feel paralyzed by the way he’s glaring at me. I look down at what I’m wearing, the same bra and panties from last night. “What? Don’t act like you haven’t seen me naked.”

“I have—and that’s precisely the fucking problem.”

I dip into the bathroom and scrub through a shower. Once I’m dressed, in yoga pants and a tight V-neck shirt, I find Wicked and Wolf downstairs, watching TV. Royce is opposite with Khaos next to him. The room is filled with leather, and usually that would probably annoy me, but for right now, I need to be with Papa.

Lowering myself onto the floor, I tie the laces to my Converse, watching every few seconds as Wolf keeps his eyes glued on the TV.

My phone starts vibrating on the carpet, and I see Mikhail’s name flash over the screen. I look up at Wicked, making sure he didn’t notice. How is it that I feel like I’m cheating on Wicked with my damn fiancé?

Swiping to answer, I bring the phone to my ear. “Hi.”

“I just heard,” he says coldly through the phone. “We’re heading to meet your father.”

My blood turns cold. “No. Not without me.”

“Last I checked, I don’t need to answer to you or oblige to your demands, Lala.” He pauses and hope tingles my fingertips.

“You’re right, maybe we should—”

“—but, we both made a blood oath and promise to our families. I intend to keep it.” Those tingles fizzle out. “I’ll call you once I finish with the meeting but, Ruby, you will need to start deciding what you are bringing to

my house after the wedding.” My phone slips from my ear and I hit the end call button.

“What?” Wicked asks, but I push myself up from the floor and move into the kitchen, opening the cupboards to find my coffee pods. I need coffee. Now.

The elevator doors part open just as I’m closing the lid and pushing the button. Val enters, his hands shoved into his pockets and his eyes dipped in with concern.

“What is it?” Wicked repeats, coming into the kitchen and ignoring Val.

I look between the two of them. “That was Mikhail.”

Wicked chuckles, leaning back against the fridge and crossing his ankles. He’s still shirtless, with nothing but a clean set of sweatpants. I’m guessing Royce or Khaos brought them for him.

“Fuck,” Val sneers, entering the kitchen further. “I’m sorry, Ruby. I don’t think he’s going to let you out of it. Even with your father back, we still need that bridge of peace between the two families, or we both risk a war that either side could possibly lose.”

I hold my hand up, stopping him from talking as I turn back to the coffee machine, pull down a mug, and pour the dark java into it. Leaning against the counter, I inhale, exhale, and take a sip. I feel my muscles unknot as the caffeine hits my blood. “I know. He has just made that very clear.” I refuse to look at Wicked when I answer, keeping my eyes on Val. “I need you to take me to where they’re meeting.”

“I can’t, Rubs. I have strict orders to keep you here, and since he’s home now—”

My eyes close and I take another large gulp, this time burning the hairs on the back of my throat. “I get it.”

Val steps closer to me, but a safe distance away. I feel the energy in the room shift the closer he gets. “I’m sorry about your mama.”

“Yeah.” I blink up at him. “Me too.”



Twenty-One

Wicked

The night was dark, and I ran through the clearing of the forest, running and running until my legs couldn't fucking run anymore. Through the splitting of the trees ahead, I could see it. The white, abandoned building. Abandoned, at least from what people knew. Flickering of lights forged on through some of the windows, and I stepped forward, squinting to see up ahead.

He stood there with a dark robe and blood-red tie around his waist. I couldn't see his face, but I could feel the anger pulse through my veins the closer I got to him. There was a city car parked at the front, tinted windows and headlights beaming. Skully removed the hoodie from his head and leaned into the car.

The back doors swung open, and I watched as he carried a girl's body out, cradling it in his arms.

I fell backward slightly, wiping the sweat from my forehead.

A hand came to my back, shoving me forward. "You're not going anywhere."

I spun around, coming face-to-face with Jordan, one of the other members. "She looks young."

“She is young,” Jordan answered, stepping to the side and moving the branch out of the way. I was fine exercising out on my own, but as per usual, Jordan liked to ride my dick about everything. We all knew it was jealousy. “She’s also different. I feel like to Skully, this one is different.”

We both made our way through the trees, and I paused when I was about to pass the front of the car. His eyes locked on mine, and for a brief moment, I wanted to launch my fist in the car.

“Come on, fucker!” Jordan called out ahead. “Or you don’t eat.”

I dragged my eyes away from him, jogging up the withered old steps and to the front entrance. It was extra quiet tonight, and I wondered in the back of my mind if it had anything to do with her. I hadn’t even met her yet, nor did I know her, but Jordan was right. There was something about her that Skully needed—no—wanted. I just hoped it wasn’t what I thought it would be.

Making my way through the hallway, I turned my head just in time to see Skully sitting beneath the cross in the chapel. Bright red lights shone through stained glass windows, and the bench chairs were pushed up a little too close together since the space was small. In the background, I could hear cutlery clinking and the distant smell of roasted chicken, but I knew he would want to see me.

I took one step through the entry.

“Close the door.”

I paused before reaching back and closing both of the swinging doors. Turning back around, I took the steps toward him, head cast down enough to not show my eyes. Also, where the fuck did he put her? Was she in here?

I counted the steps that echoed through the cold space until I was just behind his bench. Lowering myself down, I finally raised my head. “You wanted to see me?”

“Hangman...” One name, one meaning. I didn’t hate it, even though I knew I should. I just hoped that what he was doing with this girl, wasn’t what he usually did. “I got a new drop tonight.” I leaned back in my chair, eager to listen. I think he liked that about me over the other kids. I didn’t mind listening. I preferred it. If you listened close enough, people always told you who they were. “This one is different, though. She’s not for product.” My brows hit my hairline. I felt a sudden relief that that was the case. “Once a week, she will drop on our doorstep until she turns seventeen.”

“Seventeen?” I answered, squeezing my fists. “And how old is she right now?”

“Twelve.”

I winced. I shouldn’t. It never mattered to me before. I was named Hangman for a reason, I did my job expertly, even for all of my thirteen years. He knew it, I knew it.

“When she turns a certain age, you will be collected. You may choose one to go with you as your sibling.” Poppy. Instantly knew I would take her.

“Why?” I knew that I shouldn’t ask, but I couldn’t help it. My tongue wasn’t so restrained as the rest of me. “What made her different?”

“When you’re meant to know—” He turned to face me and his white eyes came to mine. “You will know.”

“Great,” I grumbled, my knee jiggling. “Why does she come once a week if I can’t hang her? Can I Dragon practice on her?”

He chuckled so deep it sounded demonic. “Although I think all of the training in the world is good, no. She comes one night, once a week.”

“What if she screams? Everyone hates the ones who scream.”

“She won’t,” Skully said, staring up at the Virgin Mary. “Simply because she will not ever know about this.”

I blink past the memory. Even as the coffin goes down, I can’t shake the anger that’s constantly simmering around my heart. Leaning down, I kiss Wolf on the top of his head, keeping my eyes on Victor. I know he can’t see me behind my dark glasses, but I feel it. It feels good to be able to do it freely.

Hiking Wolf up farther, I tighten my grip around him as Ruby leans down, picking up a white rose and bringing it to her lips, kissing the petals softly before dropping it down to Mama’s coffin. Even as a kid, Mama was a good person. She was pure-hearted and everything a teenage girl needed in their life. I know that this loss is going to be huge on Ruby, but as usual, she’ll hide it, but it’s always going to be my job to find her in her darkest areas and sit with her.

She steps back and Mikhail’s hand finds hers. That same rage burns to life, only hotter. I wish I could take satisfaction in the knowledge that he knows exactly who the fuck I am, but unfortunately, he doesn’t. Now I have to wear: the biker who knocked up Ruby years ago by accident. Yeah, and the dumb fuck actually believes it.

Royce moves into me. “I know you want to take this slow from here on out, but brother...”

“I know,” I whisper, keeping my eyes locked on Victor.

“You’ve waited long enough.”

“I know,” I repeat, squeezing Wolf into my chest.

He raises his little arms up and rests them around the back of my neck, and I take him to the roses, leaning down and picking up two, giving one to him. “Drop it in for Nona.” He puckers his little lips and I drop it down into the dirt.

I kiss the petals and let it fall from my fingers. “I’m sorry,” I whisper under my breath. Only she knows what I’m sorry for, and that’s how it will always stay.

Wolf grabs my phone out of my leather pocket and I place him onto the ground to run toward Ruby as I ease back into the crowd, lost with Royce on one side, Khaos on the other, and three other brothers from the Chicago chapter that stayed on under my hand. There are another three hanging back at the clubhouse, and two on security near our bikes. There’s a complete flip to two worlds standing here. The mafia and the MC. I know I’m on the right side.

“You got a plan, brother?” Royce whispers.

I nod. “I do, but you’re not gonna like it.”

“Motherfucker, Jade is going to eat my dick on a platter for the next month if I don’t make my way home, so we’re gonna need to hurry this along.”

“I know,” I say. “It’s just trying to get her away from all of that.” Both him and Khaos turn as I say the words.

“Yeah... good luck with that.”

“Don’t need luck. I need to find a fucking skull head.” Wolf comes running back to me, handing me my phone. “And you need to give Lion a heads-up. We might need more men.”

“Done.”

I have a plan, but I know that once it all unravels, I’ll lose her forever. Possibly even my son, but it is worth it because then those who deserve it can be punished.



Twenty-Two

Ruby

I skip the wake and let Mikhail drive us home. The silence is killing me, and part of me wants to know why he's still agreeing to marry me after all this time. Is his male pride really that fragile?

Possibly.

"You don't have to come in." He pulls up to the front of the hotel, rounding the valet area and putting the gear into park.

"I know. Just so we're clear, the wedding is in two weeks." I reach for the handle, eager to get out of his car.

"Yes, Mik. I just buried my mother, but sure." Pushing the door open, I slam it closed and flip him off when he drives away. I make my way through the foyer, seeing Val standing near the reception desk, waiting for me.

"I thought I told you not to flirt with the staff?" I smile at the young girl behind the desk as he comes up beside me.

We start making our way to the elevators. "She's hot. Sorry, can't help myself."

"Leave the poor girl alone."

The doors separate and we step through. Once they close again, Val breaks the silence. “Are you actually okay?”

“I am.” I adjust my handbag on my shoulder. “Having Wicked back and co-parenting with him has made it easier too.”

“Just... co-parenting?” Val wiggles his brows at me and before I can answer, the doors are opening onto my penthouse.

Stepping through the kitchen, Wicked and Wolf are relaxed on the couch.

Wicked stands and gestures to the kitchen. I leave my bag on the counter as he leans against the fridge. “Gonna need to spend some time at the clubhouse over the next few days. Was thinking you and him can come with?”

I chew on my lip, my eye twitching. “Smart of you to invite us both.”

The corner of his lip curls. “Well, I sure as fuck know you won’t be letting him come alone.”

I sigh, lowering myself onto a dining chair. “I guess we need to talk about all of that at some point, but you’re right, it’s too soon, and I don’t want him to be away from me right now, even if he does know you’re his father.” Leaning forward, my fingers itch for a cigarette. Dammit. Quitting is hard. “But I understand so we will come. Honestly, I need to plan this fucking wedding, so Betty will be spending time there too.”

“Fine.” Wicked rolls his eyes, going back into the lounge. “I’ll pack his bag.”

“You know...” Val interrupts when Wicked has disappeared.

“Shut up, Val,” I mutter, resting my head on the back of the chair.

“Is that bitch Sloane there?” Betty asks loudly so Wicked can hear as I clip Wolf into his belts.

I glare up at her as she slides into the passenger seat, flipping Wicked off. I’m positive he would have done it first as he clips his helmet over his head and fires up his bike.

“I haven’t asked.” Shutting the back door, I shuffle into the driver’s seat and push to start. Buying the G 63 was a family car move, but I don’t think I’ll buy another one again.

“Why not?” Betty asks as I drive out of the underground parking, gazing up at the rearview mirror to see Wicked following closely behind.

“Because then it will sound like I care.”

“Because you *do* care.”

I turn the music up and ignore her the whole way to the other side of town. When I roll us to a stop, waiting for the prospect at the gate to open it, she leans forward, removing her glasses. “Holy shit. This is somehow both not what I expected, yet what I expected.”

“It’s not that bad,” I say, pushing us forward and hooking a right under the carport. Wicked parks beside my car and Betty laughs.

“Did you both plan this? The white Harley and the white Merc?”

I don’t even bother answering her. Somehow, I have to plan a wedding in two weeks, and among it all, it’s a wedding I don’t even want. I’ve seen Papa once since Mama passed away, and he still won’t tell me who killed her. He says that the cops don’t know, but I don’t buy it. Everyone knows that the Cosa Nostra doesn’t deal with the cops. They’ll know who it was, and no doubt Papa will be planning her revenge. I’ve dropped it for now, but after the wedding, I will be demanding answers. Answers I fucking deserve.

My door opens and I jump, spinning around to face Wicked. “Jesus, can you not?”

“Rules.”

My shoulders straighten and my jaw tightens.

“Number one?” His brows raise slightly. “You don’t talk to anyone except Khaos or Royce.”

My mouth opens to answer back, but he curls his finger beneath my chin and flicks it closed. “Two? In here, you’re my property, so you do as I say.”

“Now I know you’re fucki—” His fingers wrap around my cheeks, squeezing my lips closed.

I glare at him.

“Three?” His eyes sparkle when he sees the anger swirl inside me. Asshole. “When the old ladies are around, you can talk with them.”

I shove my face out of his grip. “How do I know which is which?”

“Oh, you’ll know,” Betty mutters. “The old ladies will be dressed normally, and the club sluts dressed as hookers.”

Wicked’s face scrunches up. “The fuck kind of shit have you been watching? Nah, that’s not how it is here. The old ladies wear what the fuck they want and they are protected while doing it, and here—” Wicked brings his eyes to Betty. “They ain’t called club sluts. They’re handlebars.”

Betty matches his look. “How is that any better?”

Wicked moves to the back of the car, opening Wolf’s door and pulling him out. He stares at me from the back once Betty is out of the car. “I mean it, Ruby. Don’t fucking test me.” I hold his stare, pouring gas onto the flame that burns between us. His eyes turn heavy. “Or do and see what the fuck I do.” He steps back and slams the door closed.

Sliding out of the SUV, I pop open the trunk and take out mine and Wolf’s bag, but Wicked takes it from me instead. He stops when he notices that I’m not following him, turning over his shoulder. I blink between him holding Wolf and the clubhouse in the background. The parked bikes on the side and the UFC ring behind the bikes.

“You’ll be fine, Rubs.”

I smile up at him, my Converse crunching over the loose gravel.

We haven’t made our way into the clubhouse when people are cheering, patting Wicked on the back, and touching Wolf on the cheeks. Khaos swaggers over to us, holding a little leather vest with the Wolf Pack MC patch on the back, flashing me a dazzling smile. “Mommy... will you allow it?”

“First of all!” I shake my head. “Don’t ever call me mommy like that again—” Because it was kind of hot. “Second of all...” Everyone silences. The cheers and happiness. Wicked stands, searching my eyes. He and I don’t agree on a lot of things, but something I have always felt with him is that he respects me.

Sometimes.

Just not when I don’t want him to.

“Of course.” I pat Wolf’s head before sidestepping away from them and pulling a stool up beside Betty, who is already talking to Poppy, making drinks behind the bar.

Dropping my handbag onto the table, I exhale and lower to the chair. “Please don’t tell me you’re living here?”

Poppy laughs, sliding over a glass filled with tequila. “I actually love it here. They’ve turned into my family, and anyway, I’m working the field now with Anon.” She rounds the end and sits beside me. “Which is fine because I have years to catch up with as far as Wicked and Wolf go.”

I take a small sip. “I feel you.” Sighing, I sit back on the stool. “I know what you mean about this place, though. It’s not exactly”—my eyes fly around the room—“unpleasant, which makes no sense.”

“Ehhh... you’re both on crack. I could never.” Betty swirls her drink with a toothpick before spinning around to face the crowd. “Or maybe—” Her head tilts. “Why are most of them good looking?”

Poppy and I burst out laughing. It’s the first time I’ve got to sit down with Poppy and really see how she has been. I told her about Wolf’s birth, how I hemorrhaged and lost so much blood that they almost needed to put me under. I feel a little guilty that I haven’t had the conversation with Wicked yet, but I figure we will have time.

It’s an hour later and I have pulled out my phone, looking through photos.

I flash my screen at Betty, Poppy long since taken off to play the doting aunty. “I’ll just wear this.”

Betty searches my eyes, her green depths falling in sadness. “Babe, I don’t think you should marry him.”

I pull my phone back and flick through more. “I don’t have a choice. I don’t have the same choices you do.” I tap on another. “This one?”

She doesn’t even look at it. “Fine, but I swear to God if he does any shady shit, I’m killing him.”

Splashing hot water onto my face, I rub in my oils and wipe the condensation from the mirror. The room isn’t as bad as I expected, and Wicked made sure there was a small bed in the room waiting for Wolf. He has been restless tonight, but I figure it has something to do with everything going on, since he wanted to stay downstairs with Wicked until nine.

The bathroom door opens and I turn, leaning against the basin while moving my hair over my shoulder. “Wicked!” I reach for the silky robe that’s hanging over the bathtub, but his hand catches my wrist, stopping me. *Shit.*

“Open your legs.”

“What!” I snap, shoving myself out of his grip, only it doesn’t work.

He picks me up from beneath my armpits, lifting me onto the basin. His hand comes to my upper thigh and he spreads the other wide. Thank God I’m wearing basic cotton panties, or this would have been a direct show for him. More than it already is.

His thumb grazes over the tattoo over my panty line. “You, fucking what?”

My face scrunches, squeezing my eyes closed. His fingers wrap around my chin, forcing me to open them. “I was young, angry, and in my defense, you traumatized me!”

Silence stretches between us, his eyes searching mine. His mouth curves up in a slow smirk, before he’s removing his leather cut and his white shirt.

“Um... what are you doing?” I shuffle up the basin more to get comfortable.

“Oh.” He unbuckles his belt. “I’m definitely fucking you for that.”

“Ahhh...” My hands go to his chest to push him back, but he grabs my wrists and slams them up against my head, cracking the mirror.

Separating my legs, he hovers a whisper away from me. “You think you can get *Wicked fucking lies* tattooed on your skin, above this—” His finger grazes over me and I suck in a breath, my fingers clenching the porcelain basin. “—perfect fucking pussy and I not fuck the stubborn out of it?” His finger slips between my lips and I rest my head back against the glass, arching my back.

“Remember how good this feels, yeah?” He curls his finger inside me and massages gently before turning to my ear and biting my lobe. “Because you’re about to fucking hurt.”

I wrap my legs around his waist, forcing him closer into me. His hand flies up to the broken glass behind my head, and when he brings it back down between us, he holds it against my throat. The head of his cock presses against my opening as he groans, “You have no idea how much I’ve wanted to fucking slit this perfect throat of yours over the years.”

My eyes drift closed and my fingers dig into his shoulder blades when he finally forces himself inside of me. His thick cock rubs against my wet walls and I sink my teeth into my bottom lip as my legs spasm around him. “Then do it.”

The sharp edges of the glass pinch into my skin as he drives deeper inside of me, falling against my chest and licking up my neck, to my jaw and biting on my ear. “I should fucking ruin you for being with other people.” His warm breath touches my ear and I drive my nails into his lower back. “But I fucked a few too.”

I reach for the glass in his hand, yanking it out of his grip and raising it to his throat now. “I swear to God, Wicked...” My breathing turns heavy as he continues to fuck me harder, forcing my body farther up the sink.

“Do it.” He smirks over my lips, dragging his soft tongue over the swell of my bottom lip. His hips buck forward and he kisses me roughly, my legs tensing around him as my clit rubs against his pelvis. My orgasm rips through me just as the glass cuts into his neck and I drop it to the floor, my forehead dropping onto the new cut, blood dripping down my temple.

He continues to shove inside me harder and I feel myself build up once again, until I’m finally bringing my head up, my eyes colliding with his. Leaning down, he drags his tongue over the cut he made on my throat as I swipe my finger across his and push it between his lips. His eyes roll to the back of his head as he tilts his head back, and I swear to fucking God, it is the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

He brings both hands to the back of my ass and yanks me closer into his body, before picking me up and carrying me near the shower. Grabbing the shower curtain with one hand, while keeping his other on my ass to hold me up, he wraps it around my neck and pulls it tight.

My airway is instantly blocked. I suck in a deep, wheezing breath and instead of him being worried, a dark grin spreads over his face. With the blood dripping from his neck and down the side of his lips, he looks like a damn maniac. “Gonna enjoy this. Fucking you exactly how you should be —” He tightens the shower curtain, his hungry groans escaping his mouth. “Fucked. You know how that is, little Ruby Rose?”

I try to take in a deep breath, but the lack of oxygen suffocates me, so I pant. *Damn. He is going to seriously fucking kill me.* He circles his hips against me and I bite on my lower lip to stop myself from moaning.

His mouth touches mine. “On my dick, at my mercy, and only mine to destroy.” Heat ripples through my stomach and travels to my toes as I feel myself build again. I grind against him, meeting every thrust as he tightens the curtain every now and then, depriving me of air. His lips crash onto mine just as the tension he thrashed into me explodes through the air and my toes curl in, my forehead resting against his. “Mine.”

My head nods against him. “Yours.”

I wake the next morning, stretching my arms wide. I didn’t *want* to come, but even after last night, which thankfully Wolf slept through, I feel like my windpipes are clear and I can breathe again. Shifting Wicked’s heavy arm off my body and careful not to wake him, I shuffle off the bed and make my way to the windows near Wolf’s bed. The curtains are a basic white, and in

the early morning daylight, it actually looks clean. There's a double bed pushed up against the wall, with the bathroom right beside it. Wolf's bed is on Wicked's side, and I peek over to see him snoring, his little mouth parted open. Both of them as bad as each other clearly.

Partially swiping the curtains open, I look directly to the paddock near the shed, where not so long ago bodies were burning. Most of the shed has been burned to ash along with it, no doubt to kill any and all evidence, but it's the horses in the grass fields that catch my eye. Such a picturesque view, with rich green mountains and fat trees growing naturally. I feel a sense of calm wash over me the longer I'm here.

Closing the curtain, I grab Wicked's discarded T-shirt off the floor and slip it over my head. It sits around my thighs and has the Wolf Pack MC logo on the front, but it'll do. I know I've most likely got bruises around my throat and the bandage on my neck is going to be questionable. I just hope no one actually questions it. I'm starving, and once Wolf is awake, he will be too.

Running the brush through my hair, I shove on my pair of white fluffy socks and slowly turn the handle to the door. The clubhouse upstairs has multiple doors. The hallway leading down to the stairs is decorated with photographs. Members, families, old photos of men standing near their bikes, and mugshots.

I chuckle when I see Wicked's, his face straight and unmoving. "Let me tell you, big boy, this would have been your final mugshot had Papa not saved you that night." I jog down the stairs that lead to the bottom level, hearing the loud screeching of a vacuum and harsh rapping of Eminem. They have good taste whoever they are.

"Ah! No! That's *not* what I said. Bitch, are you deaf?"

I slow at the bottom of the stairs, seeing a woman vacuuming near the billiards table. She has her long black hair tied up into a messy pony, a casual Levi's shirt on, and skinny jeans.

"I'm just saying, Gracie, damn!" the black-haired girl hollers over the vacuum. "If you bite off more than you can chew, don't be fucking alarmed when you choke!" She continues vacuuming furiously, and I look to the bar, where a girl stands, staring at me with wide brown eyes. She has blonde curly hair that's wild around her face and soft tanned skin. The kind that only happens during your late teens, if you're lucky enough to not be met with acne. Which I wasn't.

The vacuuming girl sighs, banging on the power button and turning to face the blonde with a hand on her hip. “Don’t—” She follows her eyes and stops talking when she sees me. The dark-haired girl is beautiful. Sharp cheekbones, freckles scattered over her cheeks, and curves that hit all the right places. “Oh.”

“Look, I tried to get that fucking stain off the carpet, but—” Another woman enters the room just as someone turns the music off. I’m guessing these are the old ladies.

“Hi...” I test the words out on my tongue. I’ve never had to introduce myself because everyone has always known who I was. It was both a good and a bad thing. A good thing because I didn’t have to waste time with boring introductions, but a bad thing because I never knew if they were being nice to me because they were afraid I’d kill them. Or have someone kill them.

“Morning!” the blonde pipes up first from behind the bar where she’s drying glasses. “Are you Wicked’s old lady?”

I swallow a laugh as I continue my way over. “No, mother of his kid, and ex... I suppose.” I lower myself down onto the barstool, watching all three of them carefully.

“I’m June.” The older one finally stands beside Grace, placing the cleaning bottle down. “Kirby’s old lady, a.k.a. the old one with all the gray hair but devilishly great looks.” The older woman nudges her head toward the dark-haired girl. “And that is Diane. She’s, well... it’s complicated.”

“Complicated,” Diane grumbles, falling onto the stool beside me. She leans back, her eyes coming to mine. “So—since your old man is our president now—thank God for that—does that mean we will see you and that cute child more around the club?”

I open my mouth to answer when it hits me. They truly don’t know who I am. For whatever reason, their men have kept aspects of the criminal world hidden from them.

I’m jealous. I wish I had the luxury. Just for a second to not know how completely ugly the world is.

“He’s not—” I shake my head. “But yes. You will most likely see more of us.”

“That’s good!” Gracie beams a wide smile at me, her two dimples perfectly dented. “Are you from the San Francisco chapter too?”

Diane leans into me. “What she really means to ask is, can you get her laid with Khaos?”

I choke on a laugh when Gracie scowls at Diane. “Khaos isn’t hard to lay. Just say he has a pretty smile and the boy will drop to his knees.”

Gracie laughs nervously. “No thanks. I have a kid. I don’t have time to do that.”

“You do?” I ask, surprised.

“I do. She’s six months old in three weeks. Hey, you should come and bring Wolf to her party.”

I smile up at her, a genuine one because as much as I *want* to ask how old she is, I know it’s not my business.

“Alright!” June claps her hands together. “Let’s go make breakfast.”

I follow them to the back, where the cook’s kitchen is. A full industrial-style oven, workbench, and pantry fills the room, and everything is *clean*. I’m beginning to think it’s because of these three.

“You guys cook them all breakfast and clean up after them?” I open the fridge door like I own the place. “I could never. I think I’d run Wicked over while he slept if he ever expected me to do that. No offense if you love it, though, I get that.”

“Hell no!” June laughs, pulling out a large mixing bowl and wooden spoon. “We cook for us and the kids. If there are leftovers, they eat.”

Gracie shakes her head, whispering, “She’s lying. She totally cooks for them.”

June ignores her and I watch as she starts whipping up pancakes. The batter is enough to feed a large army, though, so I know Gracie is right.

“You want some help?” I ask, tying an apron around my waist. Diane and Gracie are working on their own foods.

“Yeah, hon, you can start chopping the fruit in the fridge for the juice, so remove the pips and all that nasty stuff.”

I follow orders, whipping around the kitchen to find the utensils I need. I’m on to the bananas when June comes to stand beside me, heating up the skillet. “I was a chef before I met Kirb.” Her hand hovers over the plate, waiting for it to warm. “When he and I got married, he said I’d never work a day in my life. I didn’t take him seriously at first, but then I realized that he was for real. These aren’t the kind of bikers I was clearly used to, but I grew to love them. Love him, and the club. Anyway,” she starts pouring

batter onto the hot plate, “that’s why I cook for everyone. I don’t do it because it’s a chore. I do it because I love to cook. I miss it.”

I drop the fruit pieces into the machine. “Why don’t you go back?”

She thinks on my words before turning to me. June has a motherly warmth to her. She has kind eyes that wrinkle around the edges and a little heart-shaped face. She is also beautiful. All three of them are. “Because I love him and he needs me more.” I think on her words as I start the juicer up. Could that be me? Leaving my family and being biker wife for Wicked? The thought alone sends a blanket of warmth over my body. I find myself smiling.

But I could never.

Blood in, blood out.

My smile falls.

“What about you?” Gracie asks from behind us, where she’s flipping the sausages in the oven and working on the eggs at the same time. “What do you do?”

I curl my lips behind my teeth. I should tell them, but I’m enjoying the authenticity of friendship more than I want to share. At least for right now.

“Long story.” I laugh nervously.

Diane’s eyes flick up to me, a small smirk on her mouth. “Please tell me you’re an OF creator like me so these bitches can stop riding my dick about it.”

“OF?” I ask, pulsing the machine until it’s turned to puree.

“Only Fans.”

“Oh!” I shake my head. “No. But that’s cool that you do that. I’ve thought about becoming a porn star more as an adult than ever.” They all laugh.

“Look, I respect Wicked, and I’m sure as we all get to know him even further we will love him, but he doesn’t give me Psyko vibes. I don’t think he’ll be into sharing.”

I tilt my head, ignoring the comment about Wicked. No one will ever know Wicked except Royce, Khaos, Wolf, and me. And Lion. And Papa. It was strange to me that as I chanted the list off in my head, the lonely boy who killed his father and came to my house traumatized had built such a beautiful family around him. He was healing from his trauma.

If only we could all do that.

“Psyko is another member of the club, and half of Diane’s situationship.”

“Ahh... I, too, am in a situationship,” I joke, pouring the juice into a larger pitcher.

“Not like this.” Gracie snorts beneath her breath.

“Just because we are different and more open doesn’t mean we won’t last!”

“Oh no, that I believe!” June giggles, scooping up the plates. “Let’s go serve.”

I carry the pitcher as Diane leads us through the back doors where the morning sun directly hits your face. There’s a large rectangle outdoor table that stretches along the entire length of the building. Chairs are tucked beneath, with people sitting on each one, and there had to be over twenty. Kids, old and young, leather patch members, and then there’s Wicked at the head of the table, Wolf on his lap, and the sun behind his head. Everyone is still in their pajamas mostly, so I don’t feel uncomfortable dressed how I am. And even if they weren’t, I don’t think it would bother me then either. I feel safe here. The kind of safe I always feel around Wicked.

I’m paralyzed and I can’t move. The whole time I’ve been here, I’ve felt like my old self. Free, loved, welcomed. It’s being around the club that has made me realize how cold my home truly was. Unease stirs in my belly at that realization, but I make my way down to the side of the table, lowering myself to the right of Wicked.

“Hey,” I take Wolf off him and watch as he runs toward an area to the far opposite side. There’s a wooden playground built with a sandpit, a water play area, and fresh green trees and herbs. I can’t take my eyes off Wolf as he laughs with another couple of kids as they play.

A hand comes to my thigh and my eyes flick up to Wicked’s. Everyone is lost in their own conversation, so I know they’re not paying attention to my face right now, but Wicked’s brows knot together when he sees my face. “What?”

I want to tell him that everything is too perfect here. That being here, with him, makes me feel like I’ve never felt pain in my life. That he takes it all away and he always has. That no matter what messed-up shit he has done and does to me, that I won’t look past the dark to get to the light; I’ll exist in the dark with him. I want to tell him that I’m proud of the man he has grown to be, that he is the greatest father Wolf could have ever asked

for and that I still trust him implacably. I want to tell him that I'd die for him, bleed for him, and not second-guess a single thing.

But I don't. I just stare back at him and fight the tears that choke me. Because I can't say any of those things to him.

Because I'm marrying someone else.

"Nothing." I smile at him, giving the sweetest lie of all. "Nothing at all."

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Twenty-Three

Ruby

I replay the memories of the past two days over in my head. I'm home, in my penthouse that I have created wonderful memories in, yet—it doesn't feel like home. There's an empty throbbing that won't stop beating inside of me and the only time it does, is when I think back to the passages at the clubhouse. To June, Diane, and Gracie. To Wicked with Wolf on his lap.

"You okay?" Betty asks, pulling me out of my daze. "I mean, clearly, Wicked hasn't changed, but you're going to need to cover it up before the wedding is all I'm saying."

I take a sip of my coffee, blowing on it. "I will, but Mik doesn't care. He doesn't want this any more than I do—clearly."

"That motherfucker is lucky to be marrying not just you, but a La Rosa. We all know damn well their family has dropped ranks lately." Betty knows everything. She's my constant and I don't care that she's not in-house. She's mine, so that's good enough.

"I think he's hiding something from me," I whisper, grabbing the pendant around my neck that Mama gave me.

"Oh, I bet he's hiding a whole bunch of shit!" Betty clucks her tongue, flicking through images on the iPad.

“Not him. Wicked...”

Her flicking pauses, and I know she’s staring at me. “Why do you say that?”

I stand from the table and empty my mug in the sink. “I don’t know. Since Wicked and I first met, it’s as though we’ve been tuned into each other’s emotions. I can feel in my gut when he’s hiding something from me.”

Betty raises a judgy brow. “I’m just sayin’, you didn’t say that when homeboy kidnapped you and chased you around a maze while trying to shove a needle in your arm while fucking you now, did you?”

“Betty!” I snap at her, moving back to my chair. “I didn’t tell you that shit so you could throw it back in my face years later.”

Her smile softens and she reaches over and pats the top of my hand. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Tell me more.” Betty is truly the best friend that I could ever ask for. Her mom and dad moving from Atlanta when she was four years old was the greatest gift to me, and to this day, I still go around there for homecooked meals.

“I don’t know what else to say other than it just *feels* like he is, but it’s not something small. It’s big.”

“You think it’s about your ma?” Betty asks softly, scooping her braids into a low pony.

“No.” I shake my head. “Wicked is a killer, but I know he wouldn’t do that to Wolf.”

“True.” Betty flicks her hair over her shoulder. “Then maybe ask him?”

I roll my eyes. “Sure. Betty, the only time you ask someone like Wicked a question, is when you want to be lied to.” I stare off into the distance. “We’ll find out.”

The elevator doors slide open and Papa enters, unbuttoning his jacket. “Principessa.”

“Hi!” I stand from my chair, flinging my arms around Papa’s neck. The wrinkle lines are deeper around his eyes, and his beard has grown thick. Dare I say he’s stressed. “Is everything okay?”

He takes the chair at the table, casting a short glance up at Tony behind me. “Yes. Betty, can you give us a second?” I don’t bother telling Papa that Betty knows everything about what we do. It’ll just get me in trouble.

Once Betty is out and upstairs, Papa loosens the tie around his neck. “We need to push the wedding forward.”

“What!” I fall back against my chair. “Why?”

Papa reaches into his pocket and takes out a Cuban cigar. “Because we need the alliance, Bubba. I told you about what will happen when they find out about Wicked. We need to do this fast before they do anything. Stop being selfish!” His tone is harsh, and I wince, watching as he rolls the cigar around his lips. He blows out a cloud of smoke. “And another thing, I no longer trust Wicked.”

The words hit me harder than the ones about my marriage. “What?” I shoot from my chair, spinning around to look at Tony before looking back at Papa. “Wicked is like a son to you!”

“Well, I don’t fucking need a son, Ruby!” Papa snaps again, and then slowly rises from his chair. The silence is enough to be called tension. Papa rounds the table again, pulling me in to kiss me on the head. “You and my grandson stay away from him until after the wedding.”

I don’t say anything as he disappears the way he came. I stop. “Who killed Mama?” The thought had never crossed my mind, but after Betty threw that out there just seconds ago, it’s still fresh.

Papa doesn’t breathe a word as he enters the elevator and the doors close.

I drop down onto the chair, sighing into my hands.

“Something doesn’t add up...” Betty appears in the kitchen. “I don’t think it’s Wicked you should be worried about, Rubs.” When my eyes meet hers, they’re wide with fear. “I think it’s your papa.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” I squeeze my eyes closed. “Papa has only ever done what was right for the family.”

When Betty doesn’t answer, I look back up at her and the corners of her eyes soften. “I know, sweetie, but sometimes, when we love someone, we don’t see what everyone else does.”

“I need to see Wicked.” Pushing off the table, I snatch my keys. “Can you watch Wolf?”

“Of course.” Betty shoos me away, and I wait for the elevator before stepping inside. I can’t sit still. The underlying need to know what is going on is eating me inside and if Wicked doesn’t tell me, I’ll force it out of him. The elevator stops at the bottom parking lot level and I beep my DB 11, goose bumps raising down my spine. Spinning around, I look around the space. Empty parking spots except for mine, that’s parked in the penthouse section.

Pushing the button again, I reach for the door handle just as a hand covers my mouth and I'm being dragged backward. I kick and scream, my arms flying behind me to reach for something—anything—when I'm being shoved forward and a dark blindfold is forced over my head. The sliding door to the van closes and the heavy body on top of me lifts.

“You motherfucker!” I scream before a heavy fist thumps me across the head and everything goes black.

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Twenty-four

Ruby

Water drips onto hard concrete floors to the rhythm of the pounding in my head. I slowly crack my eyes open, wincing when my hand reaches up to touch the side of my temple. Finally, I blink away from the blur and my eyes rest on the ceiling. Moss grows through paint cracks, water seeping through the damaged crevices.

I attempt to push up from the ground when my hands are unable to move. “Fuck!” I scream, tugging on the chains clasped around my wrists. Pain bites at my ankles when I realize how bad of a position I’m in.

“Motherfucker!” I turn my head to the side, blood trickling down the back of my neck.

“That’s not a very nice thing to say...” a voice purrs in the corner. All of my pain fizzles out. Even with how small the room is, against the painted concrete walls and ground, his dark shadow in the corner sticks out.

“Who the fuck are you?” He steps out from the shadows and a whoosh of air crawls over my skin. Shock seizes my muscles and I tug on the handcuffs again. “Antonio?” Confusion tugs on my heart as he makes his way to the bed, looking down on me from up above. “What is going on?”

“Ah, sweet child.” He runs the tip of his finger over the side of my face, and memories erupt inside of my mind from when I was little. “You’re Papa’s best friend?”

“Mmhmm,” he murmurs. “Do you know who else I am, principessa?” Antonio asks, his lips brushing my ear as his fingers trickle down inside my elbow. The blood drains from my face, and my eyes shoot up to his. “Starts with S.”

“You motherfucker. I should kill you!” I squeeze the chains on my handcuffs, searing anger burning through my veins.

“Why?” Skully brushes my hair to the side as a needle pinches into my arm. “Didn’t your lover tell you? Oh, but he’s been working with me all along.” My eyes drift closed, my mouth turning dry. My bones turn to lead as I struggle to stay awake. The colors and textures of the room begin to swirl together.

“Can you see me, little child?”

“I’m—” I go to open my mouth but words fail to fall out.

He turns, I think, and disappears before coming back. “I know you can hear me and will remember this, so hear this, Ruby La Rosa. Wicked was put in your life for a reason. Everything was planned... *do you still trust him?*” I feel something cold graze the inside of my thigh and I force them closed, only they’re halted by an object. The room spins as he flips me upward to standing, my arms and legs stretched wide. I wasn’t on the ground... what is this? There’s a dark figure directly opposite me, and I force my eyes wide to try to focus on it, only my heart rate speeds up and my mouth curves in a smile.

“They broke their promise to me,” he announces. Why is he still talking? I need a drink. I jolt forward and the wheels on the bottom of the bed move, pushing me close to the door. Someone spreads it wide open, and then I’m moving. Farther and farther down a black hole...

Faces fade in and out, moving closer to me and then backing away. Orange flames explode somewhere in the back, but I can’t even keep my head up.

“Up her dose. She’s too aware.”

“No, she needs to be, partly.” Metal clinks together, but I fight to keep my eyes open. Desperate. Frustration claws its way into my brain when I can’t. I can feel my grasp on reality slowly slipping away. Heat licks over

my thighs and I force my heavy eyes open to see what it is. Flames. Someone standing near the edge, holding a burning stick.

“You don’t want her organs?” someone asks in the background, and my mind is catching up, but my body won’t hurry.

“No. I had other plans for her.”

“And now?” the man asks over the clinking of utensils.

“Now, we’re going to make sure she looks clean enough.”

“...sir? That was your brother’s niche.”

“Until they killed him.”

My eyes finally close.

My hair sticks to my forehead, and my eyes slowly drift open. Everything aches. My legs, my body. I move my fingers and toes before slowly bringing my arms down and curling into a ball. I just want to sleep. Sleep...

A loud crash jolts me awake, this time entirely awake. “What!”

My head hurts and my body aches, and for a split second, I forget where I am.

Wicked’s eyes are feral and destructive when they land on me, but he launches forward and tears the chains from whatever wooden bed I’m hooked onto, scooping me up. Blood smears over my cheek from his chest, but I stay curled into him as he carries me out the door. How long have I been here? Days? Months? *Oh my God, Wolf.*

“Hey!” He kisses my forehead. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you.” I jolt beneath his hands when he kicks open a door and cold air pinches over my face. Bikes fire up as a door opens and he gently puts us both into a back seat, never letting me go.

“How long—” My body shakes as that same coldness sticks to my bones. I quiver as ice slides through my veins. My head itches for relief. Anything to stop my fucking eyes from burning in the back of my head.

“Four hours.” His voice is low but gentle.

“Four hours?” I repeat, my teeth chattering. “I thought it was weeks.”

“Psh”—Wicked snickers—“like fuck I wouldn’t find you sooner. I’m just sorry it took me four hours.” He rubs circles over my arm as whoever it is driving continues.

“You lied to me,” I whisper, my throat parched and eyes closed. I just want to sleep. “He told me you work with him, not for him.”

“Fuck.”

Sleep takes hold.

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Twenty-five

Wicked

I know, going forward, that she's going to self-destruct. That everything I'm about to leave on her lap to decipher isn't fair. It's why I haven't told her for so long. I still don't think I will, because if there's any risk at all of losing her, this would guarantee it. Not just from me, but other people too.

"She won't be ready to wake yet, Wicked," Jade says, sliding over a glass of whiskey. "You need to let her heal and recover." I flick my finger against the glass just as Royce pulls out a chair beside me.

"You know, you're fucking lucky I'm here, huh?"

I shake my head, shooting back the liquid. "Because you won't get off my tit."

"Well, shit." Royce glares at me. "It's a fucking good thing I haven't because you need me sucking on them."

"I'll always need you, brother." I clear my throat, and he pats me on the shoulder. "She's going to fucking lose it when she finds everything out, Roy." Shaking my head, I run my fingers through my hair. "She's not like Jade. She doesn't forgive me for every stupid thing I do. That bitch holds a grudge tighter than her pussy does my dick." Jade disappears through the

back with an eye roll, passing Khaos as he enters, rolling a cigarette between his fingers. I watch him carefully, needing an answer.

He shakes his head. “He got away.” Swiping up a bottle, he takes the other chair beside mine.

My jaw clenches so tight I can hear my teeth fucking crunch. “Fuck.”

“You know he was smart too. He didn’t fucking leave anything behind. He only used five people, all of which we killed, bar one, and everything that was set up there, was to dump and leave. He used a burner building, per se.” Khaos leans back in his chair. “Should we check out the asylum anyway?”

I knew he wouldn’t still be there. They cleared that shit out years ago when I went back to find him. Not one thing was dropped there. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“So are you going to tell her?” Royce asks from beside me, and I don’t turn to face him. The club here has been lenient with all the bullshit happening around us. All of which is tied to me. I’ve kept them all out for the most part. This is a war about me, not the club, and as much as a brother’s problem is a club problem, I made the choice not to bring them into it all. They’ve got families. Families that the Cosa Nostra will happily take out.

“No. Not yet. I’ll wait.”

“For what?” Royce leans forward, resting his elbows on the bar. “What could you possibly wait for?”

I clench my jaw. “The wedding.”

“And why the fuck would you do that? You know the girls are all wanting to be there.”

I turn in my seat to face him. “They’ll be safe. And why?” I shake my head, staring off into the distance. “Because she won’t believe me unless she sees it with her own eyes. It’s my only choice.”

“There’s something I need from you going forward, Wicked. And you may not like it because it is outside of this community.” I watched as he picked up a box of matches and slowly lit every candle on the mantel. “The girl I have in there, I need you to do something for me one day, and you may like it or not. I’m yet to figure that out...” I widened my arms over the edge of the bench. Any time Skully said that he needed me to do something,

I knew it was going to be bad. But with him stalling, I was sure I wasn't going to like his next words.

"I will be putting you and Poppy into a home. One night, when you receive a text message from me, you're going to kill your foster father. Now this is going to spark an avalanche of events." He turned to face me, crossing his arms in front of him. "You will be collected by a family. Her family." I adjusted myself on the wood. His jobs were usually a little less committal than this, and I was still only thirteen. When was he hoping I'd do this? "The rest will be told to you on a need-to-know basis. I don't want to overload you too much right now." He waved forward. "Go to your room."

Pushing up from the bench, I made my way down the aisle. When I hit the doors, I turned as he said, "You're the only one I can trust to get this done." I made my way down the hallway, passing the stairs that led up to the rooms. Taking the stairs two at a time, I passed all of the damaged photographs of the old nurses and doctors. It's not until I was back in my room, that I fell onto the bed, staring up at the white padded walls.

I pulled open my bedside drawer, grabbing the photo that I hadn't looked at much since Skully gave it to me when I was eight years old. A man and woman stood side-by-side. He wore a dark suit with a gray tie and had a cigar in his mouth. She had long black hair that was pulled up on the top of her head and a cigarette in her mouth. She stood partially in front of him, a possessive hand in front of him. I gathered it was my parents, even though Skully didn't tell me anything else. I wondered what happened to them. Why they put me here. Why would any parent dump their child at an abandoned psych ward and just leave? I hated them.

Scrunching up the photo, I tossed it back into the drawer and fell down onto my bed. There was a knock on the door, and I yelled to come in. It was most likely Poppy. She couldn't sleep usually and needed to sleep with me. Her parents dumped her here a year after I was. She didn't know anything about her parents. No one here did.

I opened my door and paused when I saw Henry standing on the other side. Henry and I weren't friends, yet somehow he always managed to be the person delivering news to me. "Nine-oh-two." I banged my head back on the door and watched as he moved back through the corridor. Henry was older than the rest of us, but he reminded me of a teacher's pet. Always so fucking eager to do anything for Skully. But then... so was I.

I reached behind the door and grabbed my machete, flipping my hoodie over my head. After closing my door, I made my way down, counting the numbers on each door in passing. Eighty-seven... I let the sharp tip of the machete scratch the walls as I walked down, counting the numbers beneath my breath.

902.

Shoving open the door, I saw the body tucked beneath the blankets, chest rising and falling. Perfect. I didn't have to look at this one. Stepping in, I directed the tip of my knife above the shoulder and cut the vein that pulsed on the side of the neck. Blood flowed out of the incision neatly, and I tilted my head. Henry spilled in behind me, yanking the blanket off and looking down at the blood-soaked body.

It was a girl. Young. I didn't like doing the girls. I didn't like doing any of them, but mostly the girls.

Henry fell onto the bed, his head bowed. When her head fell to the side, I saw it was Delany, Henry's sister.

"I didn't—" I say.

Henry shook his head, clenching his jaw. "Just leave." Neither of us knew who was in what room. Skully rotated them every two nights and it was always a case of Russian roulette.

"Fuck." I slid down the wall, drawing my legs up to my chest. This was going to give Henry even more of a reason to fucking hate me.

Twenty-Six

Ruby

I'm not like other girls. I've never thought much about my wedding day. It would happen because I am Papa's only child and he most definitely would shove me down the aisle to marry whatever gives the Cosa Nostra power.

In this case, it is an alliance with our enemy, because whether Papa likes to admit it or not, the peace between our two families means more than the way it looks to our joined enemies.

"Hey, baby!" Betty enters behind me, putting Wolf to the floor as he runs his little feet across the room and jumps up on my lap.

"You look pretty, Mama!" His little hand rests on the side of my face, and I search his eyes, circling his cheek with my thumb.

"Thank you, baby boy." My eyes flick up to Betty, who is standing there with raised brows. "Oh, don't look at me like that."

"Well, look!" She raises her hands in the air. "I'm just saying, I'm against this. What happened after Wicked swooped in and did Prince Charming with you?"

I shake my head, rocking back and forward on the rocking chair, my mind lost on the lace dress pooling around my thighs. "Nothing. He refuses to let me into whatever he is keeping from me."

"Did he say anything about old man psycho who used to drug you in your bed as a child being the same person who he calls Skully?"

I place Wolf on the floor and he runs back to Betty. "No. I didn't say anything to him after I blurted it out in a drug haze."

Betty scoops up Wolf. "Mmhm. Well, you're a better woman than me, but we already know this."

I stand from the chair, brushing my hair over my shoulder and turning to face Betty. "You do look beautiful. So sad I won't be there."

"I don't want either of you in the firing line if anything happens."

"I know." She closes the distance between us, bringing her hands to my shoulders. "I just wish I was there, you know. I always figured I'd be your maid of honor."

I squeeze her hand. "Not this time."

She breezes toward the door. "I'll text you when we get to the clubhouse, and let's hope I don't kill any of these boys in leather."

The door closes just as I yell out, "Be nice!" We all know that she won't.

Gathering up the rest of my things, I roll the garter up my thigh, and check myself one last time in the mirror.

The altar is too long and the church too white. Too religious. I feel like an atheist whose skin is burning with every step that I take to the end. I let Mik take my hand as we exchange vows, and I purposely ignore all of the leather that is standing in the back room.

We say I do.

He walks me back down the aisle, and Papa smiles at me with pride. Too much pride...

My steps are slow as I brush past the group at the back, who chose to stand, not sit. My eyes collide with Wicked and seconds pass.

Sliding into the back seat, I slam the door closed as Mik sits beside me, opening his phone. An emptiness throbs in my gut as I think over everything that has lead me to this point. Marrying someone I would rather push under a bus.

The car stops and he takes my hand, leading me out of the back seat. The more time goes on, the faster the wheels spin in my head. What war with the Irish? They've been quiet since. Why did I *need* to do this? The La Rosa family name is enough for people to fear. We didn't need to join

alliances with the damn Bratva. I understand why as far as money, power, greed, but as an army? What if the Bratva decide to fucking kill me instead, or better yet, abuse me the entire time of my marriage? I don't have anything to hold my safety. Nothing but trust in Papa.

Which I have.

The conference room at our hotel is dressed up in floral arrangements that release redolence that makes my nose pinch. I hate it, but I also don't care.

Papa's hand rests on my lower back as he leans into my ear. "You happy, principessa?"

I smile against him, patting his withered hand. "Sure." I feel his energy before I see him. Like a flame raging more ardently as seconds pass by.

He brushes past me as he heads out of the emergency exit. Maybe something is wrong. Betty and Wolf are at the clubhouse. Before I can stop myself, I excuse myself from the conversation and Papa glares at me as I make my way through the same door Wicked went. I hadn't even set foot out the door when he pulls me out.

"What is it?" I ask, searching his eyes. "Is something wrong?" He slams the door closed behind me, the muscles in his arms rippling.

"Wicked!" I shift around and push the locked door. "You did that on purpose. Why? Why do you fucking do this and make it harder on both of us?"

Our bodies brush against each other when his hand falls from the door. "You're making this worse than it needs to be."

He brings his finger to the side of my head, running it down to my lips. My skin prickles. "Nah, but I'm about to." He slides his thumb between my lips, and I don't know if it's from the stress happening around me or the utter feral hold that our bond has on both of us, but my hips grind forward. His thumb disappears, related by his lips as he pulls my dress up and grips me around my thighs, slamming me against the door. Gripping on to the lace garter around my thigh, he tears it off. My legs wrap around his waist as I feed him everything he's ever wanted.

"You wanted this," I whisper against his mouth, sinking my teeth into his pout every few seconds. "To fuck me in my wedding dress knowing I was marrying him." He grips my throat and forces me back against the door. Pain erupts against the back of my head, but I suck the taste of him off my lips anyway. Wicked is toxic for my soul, but the thing about toxicity is

it's addictive. He will always take care of us. Yet even then, I want to scream at him. Ask him why he would kill my mother? Because I fucking know he did, and as the saying goes—my throat constricts around the realization of what I need to do. *Just one last time.* One last time before my knife finds his heart.

I fight with his zipper and belt, moaning when his heavy cock fills my hands. Smooth and hard, I pump it slowly, watching the torment in his eyes. A battle I probably don't understand—one I won't understand because he never wanted me as a soldier. Now we would pay. One of us isn't walking away from here alive.

"You can marry whoever the fuck you want, Ruby." His hips buck forward. "You're always going to be mine." His grip around my throat intensifies, his eyes wild on mine. "Say you're mine."

I don't answer, my tongue sliding over my bottom lip. *Even in death, lover.*

"Say it, Ruby." He forces my head back again and a moan slips from my mouth as my pussy tightens. I don't answer, unable to feed him lies. "You may be his wife, but you'll always be my little slut." I breathe out loudly, my forehead falling forward as my clit tingles with need. I need to be fucked. By him. Only him. Only ever will be him.

He raises his blade up, running the edge over my skin. I relax against him, fighting tears from falling down my cheeks as I slowly grind. Needing friction. Needing to be owned, dominated, and damaged by him.

He spits in his hand and brings it to my bare pussy, and shivers rack my body. Yes. Just what I wanted. Needed. My hips buck forward like a greedy bitch, and he directs my hips over his thick cock. I yelp when he slams my weight down onto him, sinking my teeth into his smooth cheek.

"Wicked..." His tongue slides over the incision on the side of my neck, sucking up every drop as he rides into me so hard my body bounces back and forward. He continues to pound into me until I clench around him, unwilling to let go. *Let him go.* Slowly, my fingers find his and I wrap them around the base of the knife as tears prick the corners of my eyes. His fingers tighten around the base, but even if he did, he would think it would just be my turn.

He pulls away and I lose my fingers in his hair. Sweat falling down my skin, glistening against the full moon that beams behind him. My wedding

dress puffs around us both, blood dripping down from my neck and onto my bodice.

Our eyes collide, and for a moment, I don't want this to end.

"You don't fucking matter." The words leave his mouth like a melody written just for me. He continues with his dirty, degrading talk and every single word pushes me closer to the edge.

"This how he fucks you, huh?" He pulls back just enough to search my eyes. Shit. No. He hasn't fucking touched me. "Show me how he fucks you so I can destroy it."

My cum drips from between my thighs. "Please..."

"No," he snaps, his finger digging into the incision on my neck. All train of thought is lost. All of my plans to kill the one person who I've trusted immensely. Loved unconditionally. I squeeze him around his neck as I think of driving a knife into his skin, watching blood spill out of the cut. I explode around his cock, my orgasm ripping through me like a tidal wave of deceit. He pulls out and lowers me to the floor, finishing on my wedding dress.

"Was that my wedding gift?" I ask him softly, adjusting my dress, even though it's ruined. I don't know how I'm going to explain any of it, the cum included.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Gunshots fire off inside and my blood turns cold. My eyes find his.

"No." His mouth curves in an evil smirk. "That is."

I shove him in the chest, turning to yank the door open, but it doesn't work.

"Listen to me, Ruby!" He forces me back around to face him and my hand flies to his cheek.

"Fuck you, Wicked!"

"What the fuck!" He grabs me by the wrists, forcing them above my head. Blood oozes out of the cut slowly, but not enough to be worried about, and anyway, right now I can't think of me. I need to get in that room. "What's your fucking problem now? Hmm?"

"You!" I scream so loud my head throbs.

He chuckles, shaking his head and releasing me. "Go on then, little one. Go run back to Papa and see who he really is."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I scream again, shoving him away and picking up my dress to jog down the steps, down the dark

alleyway. I round the quiet street, the front sliding doors parting open. I try to run faster, and I think I am, but every time I think the doors to the conference room get closer they take a step back.

Forcing the doors open, my ears ring as I look around the place. Bodies litter the floor with torn flower petals falling around me. The Russians are on one side, and Papa on the other. Where the fuck has the rest of the La Rosa army gone? Val is near Royce and the MC farther toward the back, and I do a quick scan to make sure Jade and Poppy are okay.

“What the fuck is happening!”

Papa spits on the ground, glaring up at me. “Why don’t you ask your baby daddy?”

“Or—” Wicked says from behind me, but I ignore him, pushing and stepping over the dead bodies and puddles of blood to get to Papa. I wince when I see Tony’s lifeless body at Papa’s feet. Tony knew me all of my life, but he was Papa’s main man.

Kneeling in front of Papa, I let my hands rest on his knees. “You told me he killed Mama. I’m sorry. I couldn’t do it. I can’t do that to Wolf, or—to me. I love him, Papa. I’ve loved him since the day you brought him home.”

Papa whacks my hands off his knees and I fall to the ground near Tony. Shock grips me around my bleeding neck as Wicked launches forward, grabbing Papa from around the throat. “Probably should stop doing shit to piss me off, old man.”

“Wicked!” I scream so loud my vocal cords tear from my throat. “Put him down!” I spin around to see Mikhail and the Bratva watching carefully. “Leave this. It’s family business.”

“Clearly,” Mik murmurs, leaning against one of the tables tucked in the corner. “Tell me, Wicked, why haven’t you told her about Skully?”

“Shut the fuck up,” he growls over his shoulder.

Mik chuckles, wagging his finger. “You and I both know she should know about that.”

“Know what?” I push myself up from the ground and grab Wicked from the shirt, tugging him back. He doesn’t move. It’s like shifting a brick wall.

Wicked lowers Papa to the ground. “You wouldn’t believe me, so I needed to show you.”

“Show me what?” I snap, looking around the bodies on the ground, mainly Cosa Nostra.

Mik chuckles, stepping forward and dodging the bodies spilled over the floor. “You’re right, this isn’t our war, but—” He leans down, his fist wrapping around my hair and tugging me back. “You would have made a great wife, had this been real fun.”

My blood turns cold and I spin around, face-to-face with the monster I never asked for. “What?” Confusion from all sides drowns me.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Mikhail?” Papa spits, and I’ve never seen him lose his cool quite like he is. His eyes fly over Mik and land on his men. Mikhail’s father died when he was a child, so the only person who runs the Bratva’s crazy ship is him.

I turn back to Wicked, swallowing the pain in my throat. He releases Papa, dropping him back to the chair he was sitting on. When his eyes meet mine, all of the pain he has hidden from me knocks me off-balance. “I was put in your life to bring you to Skully, Ruby. Poppy and I were placed in a foster home, one I didn’t know were members of the Bratva—” His eyes fly over his shoulder, his jaw tensing when they’re on Mik, before coming back to me. “Skully ordered me to kill the family we were with. I did. I had to and didn’t have any choices when it came to him, or he’d hurt Poppy.” Wicked falls back against the table, crossing his ankles at his feet, looking over his shoulder and nudging his head at Val, who slowly makes his way to me. “When I killed them, it drew the attention of your papa. That’s why he took me in. Everything was a need-to-know basis. Your papa has been feeding you to Skully since you were a kid. I saw you once, drugged out and dragged through the asylum, and I saw him.”

I blink past the tears. This can’t be true. “Saw who?”

Wicked’s eyes shift to Papa. “Him.”

Pain grips my heart as my eyes fall on Papa. “What? No...”

“You know I wouldn’t, principessa.” Papa’s voice breaks at the end. “He’s just trying to save his ass because he killed your mother.”

I look back at Wicked, who does nothing to interrupt Papa’s rambling.

Wicked snickers, his jaw clenching. “Kind of hoped you’d fucking believe me, Rubs.”

“Well—” Mik steps up beside me, handing me his phone. “Good thing I’ve got footage.”

Wicked’s eyes narrow on Mik. “What happened to not having any proof, asshole?”

He continues. “Because it’s more fun this way.” He flashes a wide grin. “I didn’t want this fucking marriage any more than you, so we made the contract not legal. Truth is, your papa has a side hustle, Ruby La Rosa, and it came to bite him in the ass. Fuck the commission. We were going to take you for us, you know, revenge and all that—” Mik bites on his cigarette. “But then Wicked came through with something better. We take your papa instead! Marvelous.”

I step between Mik and Papa, clutching the phone in my hand and zeroing my eyes on Mik. “You’re not going near him.”

“Thought you might say that, wifey, so please...” He smirks at the phone in my hand. “Push play.”

Victor La Rosa knew what he needed to do. His wife was the only person he knew would always matter to him. That was, of course, until he found out the truth about the one he married. He had pride too wide for his body.

The night was cold tonight. Colder than usual. He brought it down to the fact that the trees were bare from fall.

“Victor.” Antonio gestured his hand into the doors that lead into the old run-down asylum. Antonio was no different than Victor. They both knew what the other wanted from the other, but neither of them wanted to say it out loud.

Victor stepped through the doors, his glossy loafers tapping against the clear tiles. He followed Antonio as he led the way down to the end of the corridor, where a door waited for him. “We do all business talk in here, because if you’re wearing a bug, you get shot.”

Victor let the insult fly over his head. They both knew that the day Victor worked with the cops would be the day he would be thrown down a grave. He wasn’t interested in breaking Omertà.

He took the spot beside Antonio, keeping his eyes focused on the statue ahead of him. Virgin Mary crying blood. “You couldn’t be more weird if you tried—” Victor turned to him. “Brother.”

“Mmhmm. I know.” Antonio crossed his hands in his lap. He knew what his brother had come to say, but he awaited eagerly on the words to leave his mouth. Antonio had waited for this moment since she was born. It was like watching the ice melt in Antarctica.

“She will be ready when she’s seventeen. It will need to be handled delicately, as she will be known among our worlds to be my daughter. People will ask questions. It can’t be done quickly. I need her up until that

point.” Victor waved his hand. “You can experiment your drugs on her until you take her. Pearl will ask questions, though, so we will have to handle that.”

Antonio moved forward to see his brother’s eyes. He always knew when he was lying. “I agree, but I do have to ask, will you be telling her before she is handed over?”

“You can’t hand her over, Antonio,” Victor snapped at his brother, once again annoyed at his lack of knowledge. It was why their parents exiled him from the family. He clearly made a new one with K Diamond. “You need to plant someone in her life. Someone from outside our families. Use one of your little—” Victor looked over his shoulder at the young boy standing near the doors. “Experiments.”

“The human anatomy is far from a hobby, and if it wasn’t for what I do, brother, a lot of people wouldn’t have organs now would they? Since the system would rather see people die.”

“Oh, don’t act like you’re God. You kill more people than the system.”

“Also true,” Antonio said smoothly. “However, don’t worry. I will have it handled. She will be seventeen. I will put someone into her life that their main mission will be to bring her to me. Get close to her.”

Victor’s eyes fell on Antonio. He knew his brother. He was deceitful, but he trusted him with this because he knew he needed Ruby. “Whoever it is cannot be linked to the Cosa Nostra, or any mafia, underground outlaw. He must be a simple person with a simple life. One I can pierce into. They’re easily manipulated.” Victor stood, wiping his hands down his suit and nodding at his brother. “You will have your daughter back, even though I should kill both you and Pearl for doing what you did.”

“I want her too,” Antonio said just as Victor was about to leave the room. “I want her dead. You know if I don’t get these things, La Rosa, that I will entice a war so heinous not even you could escape. You can’t run from me...” Laughter cackled through the haunted building.

The phone slips from my fingers as I turn back to Papa, unable to grasp the scene that played out in front of me. “How could you...”

His face changes from trying to get me to believe him to complete and utter disgust. “Because you are not my daughter. Because you are the product of your mother’s deceit!”

Wicked clucks his tongue. “I’d be really fucking careful with your next words, Papa La Rosa.”

“But—” I squeeze my eyes closed. “I don’t understand anything.”

Mik pipes in from the back, and the smell of metallic and rotting flesh engulfs me. “Your dear Papa, I mean the real one, was a lot smarter than your fake one gave him credit for. Placing you in the home of—my—parents, ordering Wicked to kill them to gain the attention of Victor, and Victor thinking this poor innocent civilian could be led blindly...”

“Then why haven’t you killed all of us over it?” I yell, spinning toward Mikhail with tears rolling down my cheeks.

“Because, little wife, your pet monster has protected you all along.”

“Right,” I murmur, unbelieving. “He dragged me to a fucking maze and drugged me! Don’t tell me that’s protecting!”

Mik’s brows raise. “And then let you go.” He lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “Well, I can’t answer for the way he went about it, but I can tell you why we didn’t just kill you all instead, and that’s simply because Wicked?” the corners of his mouth curve up in a dark grin. “Gave a better ultimatum. I take La Rosa and Antonio, you go back to being the baddest mafia bitch everyone loves with a forever alliance to us with no war, and Wicked—” His eyes flash up to him before moving over his shoulder. “Will give my brother back unharmed.”

“Brother?” I follow his eyes. Val sidesteps out, flashing me a smile. “No.”

Val’s arms wrap around my body, pulling me in tight. He kisses my head. “I’m sorry, baby girl.”

“No, you’re not,” I grumble into his chest.

He chuckles. “No, I’m not. You were entirely too much fun.”

“Can I keep you?”

He leans down until his lips are at my ear. “You’ll always have me.”

It makes sense now, why Wicked hated Val so much. Slowly, I turn back to Papa, tears long since dried. “You know I’ve felt pain, Papa. I’ve been shot, hurt”—I cast a side glance at Wicked—“and manipulated most of my life. But you? You were my constant. You were my first love and my heart.”

Papa—Victor says nothing. His mouth slams closed and his fists clench on either side of his thighs.

“I don’t understand why I didn’t know any of this or pick it up.”

Wicked moves closer to me, kneeling down when I drop onto a chair near Tony's body. "You couldn't." Wicked stands again, turning to face Papa. "Of course we all found out who my parents were, and Victor had to change course when he found out I was Sicilian Cosa Nostra blood. He had to change course."

Papa sneers, spitting on the ground. "Your father was weak."

"I don't give a fuck." Wicked grins. "I didn't know him to care."

"He wasn't—" Mikhail steps on top of Tony's chest, coming closer. "For one, he never shat on his family."

I reach for Mik's arm. "I get that you want your revenge, but I need to ask for one thing."

Mikhail's face scrunches up, as though he doesn't want to give me what I want. He spews off in Russian beneath his breath before waving his hand for me to continue.

"I want Skully. It's only fair he's mine and Wicked's..."

Mik's eyes flick between the both of us. In the height of things, I don't think I'm asking too fucking much, considering the shit I've had to go through. "If I do that, you owe me, little wife."

A dark chuckle crawls its way down my spine. "Call her that again and you'll be eating through a straw. Mafia bosses aren't that scary when they've got no tongue." Wicked's words are calm, but the smirk on his mouth is playful.

Mik winks at him, nodding his head. "Fine. But you owe me."

"If it's any consolation, I loved your mother." Victor takes out a cigar from inside his jacket. "Unfortunately, that never spread to you. You were a reminder of her betrayal. Every time I look at you, principessa, I have to force myself to not kill you myself. That your fate would be much worse."

His words bounce off the barrier I've thrown up over my emotions. "Get him out of here."

I close my eyes as Mikhail's soldiers scuffle with grabbing him. I wait until silence surrounds us before opening my eyes, Wicked's fingers grazing my chin. "I'm sorry, baby."

Shaking my head, I inhale through the pain of my heart breaking in my chest. "It's fine. Now we need to find this psychopath and put it all to bed." Wicked takes my hand and pulls me to where Royce, Jade, Poppy, Khaos, and a couple of their other brothers from the MC are.

Jade hooks her arm in mine, resting her head on my shoulder. “I’m sorry. Let’s take you home.”

I move fluidly, almost as though I don’t know how to walk again. They put me into the back seat of my car and drive us out to the clubhouse. The blood stains on my wedding dress are a constant reminder of everything that has happened. Will be a constant reminder of everything.

I turn to face Wicked. “That’s why he faked his death? Because of Mik?”

Wicked’s eyes soften around the sides. “Yeah, babe. He knew it was about to break out about me being here and him helping. I had to get to Mikhail before he found out. That month we were gone, I managed to make contact with Mikhail and hashed it all out.”

I rest my head back against the chair, watching as the trees pass my window. “All this time?”

He reaches over, unclips my belt, and pulls me in close under his arm. “Until the end of time. I’m sorry I couldn’t save you earlier. I didn’t know what the fuck to do.”

“When did you change your plan of stealing me and using me as one of your victims?” I ask softly, running the palm of my hand over his thigh. His muscles bounce against it.

“The day I let you go in the maze. I wasn’t supposed to.” His eyes squeeze closed.

“Wait.” I push up from the car, searching his eyes. “You were locked up in that den because you let me go?”

“It was you or me, and because K Diamond didn’t have a beef or need for you, I knew I could negotiate so long as it happened before Skully came back. Only he never came back...” He frowns, looking out the window as if lost in thought.

“I’m sorry—” The tears fall down my cheeks and the emotion that I’ve tried so hard to keep on track releases. It’s as though the floodgates tear through me, and I can’t do anything to stop them. “I was such a brat too.”

He chuckles, pressing my head against his chest. “Just how I like you.”

We stay in silence all the way back to the clubhouse. I can feel the tension rolling off of him, and by the time we pull up, he’s agitated to the point that I can see it.

“What’s wrong?” He takes my hand gently and slides me out the back of the car.

“Nothing. Come, Betty has Wolf asleep in her room so that he doesn’t get to see any of this.”

I let him direct me through the clubhouse, upstairs and into our room. I don’t waste time heading straight for the shower. Wicked turns it on for me before his fingers graze the edges of my spine. I step under the water, letting it turn red as it washes over my body. Over the last couple of months, I’ve lost my mother and who I thought was my father, and gained yet another, but this time, I feel he’s much worse. How could someone raise a child that long as their own and not share any compassion or care at all? Everything he told me. The act. A *lie*. I know I’ll have to take this to the Commission this coming week and tell them what has happened, which is going to leave the La Rosa family in a volatile position.

The thing is, I don’t want it.

This was Victor’s world. I don’t want anything to do with it anymore.

I scrub up, get dressed, and once I’ve reentered back into the bedroom, I see Wicked placing a still sleeping Wolf down onto his bed.

He walks over to me, wrapping an arm around my back and pulling me in close. “I have to go down for church with the brothers. You okay here?”

I nod, resting my head beneath his chin. “I don’t want it, Wicked.”

The silence stretches between us, and I know he understands what I mean. “I know, baby. We’ll figure it out.”

I push away from him, bringing my eyes up to his.

“We’ll figure it out—together,” he confirms and my stomach twists.

“I almost killed you tonight.” Guilt is a fickle emotion. It’s relentless.

He laughs, flashing his pearly whites. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

I lean up on my tippy toes, pressing my lips to his. Warmth fills my body until it turns to fire and ripples down my legs and settles in my stomach. He picks me up from the backs of my thighs and walks me back into the bathroom.

“I thought you had to go downstairs.”

“They can wait,” he growls over my lips, kicking the bathroom door closed to shut off from Wolf. Flicking the silk strap off my shoulder, he bites down on the curve of my jaw, his hand coming to my breast. He flicks my nipple before sucking my tongue into his mouth. Wrapping my legs around his waist, he turns me over to the back, wrapping my long hair around his wrist and tugging backward on it until I come face-to-face with both of us in the mirror.

The lighting hits the outline of his jaw, displaying the rose tattoo on his neck. “What’s with the rose, and be honest.”

“Oh, you mean the Ruby Rose tattoo?” His eyes turn gentle on mine, but his grip tightens.

My heart fractures in my chest, this time to let him in. Can’t believe he did that. He enters me from behind and I moan out a yelp. His hand slams over my mouth as he takes me from behind. Hard, fast, his grip around my waist enough to leave a bruise. Two seconds later, I crash around him and release, collapsing into his arms when he tucks himself back into his jeans. Spinning me around, he moves my hair away from my face and presses a kiss onto my lips.

“That was for you, not me. I’ll be back later but don’t stay up.” He kisses the dried blood on my neck. “I’ll fuck you in your sleep.”

My thighs clench, a soft moan leaving my lips. “Please do.”

When he turns to leave, I fold my arms in front of me. “Where you going?”

He looks over his shoulder. “To fill the brothers in. Go to sleep, Ruby.” I wait until he’s left before finally falling into bed, ignoring the pain of Victor. Wicked’s love is potent enough to drown out any daddy issues I could possibly get from this.

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Twenty-Seven

Wicked

The MC has always been a family. I think it's why I found a home within the confinements of the clubhouse, because I never had that growing up. Everything there was a mask, fake, because they had to be.

Royce is to my right, with Khaos on the left. Beside Khaos is Kirby, Psyko, and Felon, and then beside Royce is Pope and Rellik, the other members. I wasn't mad that we lost a bunch of them when I took over presidency. The fucking whole lot of them were run by an idiot. They left the same way they came.

"Thank you for being there tonight," I start, looking around at them all. "I mean it. This isn't something you have to take on, it's mine, but I appreciate the support."

"Brother, we are here to stay. What is yours is ours..." Psyko says, his arms spreading wide. One of his eyes are pure white from being shot when he was a kid. Psyko, from what I've heard, is one of the loyal brothers we have in the MC.

"Hear, hear," they all sound out around the table.

"Brother," Royce murmurs, staring at me from over his glass.
"Continue."

“My old lady’s old man isn’t who we thought he was. Not her old man. Was cooking her up all along for me to send her back to Skully—who happens to be her biological father.” I lean back in my chair, flicking my unlit cigar between my fingers. “There’s something I’m missing.” I rack my brain for the missing pieces.

“I don’t know.” Khaos lights his cigarette, bringing it to his lips. “I think it’s pretty fucking black and white, brother.” He flicks the ash. “Skully sent you in, got you to whack off your fake parents, which he knew were part of the Bratva, and Mik’s parents, which would draw attention to Victor who killed yours, which gave him a reason to bring home two stray cats, and the wife and Ruby wouldn’t think anything of it. That way you could do your mission and gain Ruby’s trust enough to take her without it being a display that would hit the headlines of every fucking news agency. Old man Victor found out about you being of Sicilian blood, and after your initiation, found out about Mikhail being after him for the parents thing and the set-up from Skully so faked his death for a couple years.”

“But that’s the thing.” I roll the fat trunk of my cigar between my fingers. “Why would he kill Pearl? Even his last words to Ruby were that he loved her mother.”

“Fuck. Probably should have got that out of him before we sent him off to the butcher, huh?” Felon jokes, smirking at me from the end of the table.

“Nah, he wouldn’t have told us shit...” Royce plays with the Zippo in his hand. “Wicked is right. Something ain’t right. Did Victor even ever find out about her mother if it wasn’t him? Who offed her?”

I shake my head. “I don’t fucking know.”

“Well, we’re in bed with the Bratva now, so whatever needs to be done, we need to make sure we don’t piss them off in the process.” Khaos taps his temple. “What if—now hear me out before you all pop off on me. We hack their system? Anonymous would be in because last I checked, Skully still harmed women and children in The Institution.”

Smart little fucker.



Twenty-Eight

Ruby

I knew sleep wasn't going to be easy tonight, but I expected at least an hour or two. Reaching for my phone, I open a text from an unknown number.

Meet me at the turnoff. You know which one. And come alone. I throw my blanket off my body, sliding out of bed and shuffling on a Wolf Pack hoodie and yoga pants. Wolf snores peacefully, unaware, but I know Wicked is downstairs. Do they have people on the gate when they do church? I guess I'm about to find out.

I type out a reply, **This better be important**, before calling Betty quickly to tell her I am leaving and to come sleep in our room.

Tiptoeing through the courtyard, I squeeze the handle to my G-Wagon and slide into the driver's seat. Popping open the compartment drawer, I check the Nine that's in there and push it into the band of my yoga pants before starting the car and reversing out of the park, driving forward.

A young man with an unpatched leather cut appears around the corner, squinting his eyes to look into the car.

“Fuck.” I wind the window down, plastering on a fake smile. “Hey! I’ve got to head out and pick something up from the town. Open up.”

He's young with curly hair and innocence on his face. Poor kid probably has no idea what he's getting into. "I don't know... Wicked said no one leaves or enters."

"Mmhmm... and who am I?" I ask, brows arched.

"Wicked's old lady?"

"Correct. Open the gate, please."

He nods, rushing off to the gate and flicking it open. I take no time accelerating and zipping off down the road. There would be no way that Wicked would allow me to leave without him, but this is my business, not his. I have to handle it the way I know how. The way I was raised to handle it. I watch as trees pass by the faster I go. Turning down the familiar roads, I wait until the gates come into view, this time all the lights off. Memories of when I was a kid, and ran safely around the property, being his perfect little girl fill my brain and tears fall down my cheeks as I drive the G-Wagon through the gates. I'm angry that I care. That I'm not as emotionless and heartless as I pretend to be. "Dammit, Mama."

I park next to his car, opening my door and sliding out.

"I didn't think you'd come..."

I roll my eyes, slamming the door closed. "Well, I'm strapped, so there is that."

"I'm wounded that you would think I'd do that to you..." Gio puts his hand on his chest in mock pain. "Hey, cuz, heard what happened."

I let his arms wrap around my body and sigh into his embrace. "I don't know what to do, G. I'm a mess. After all this. What am I supposed to do? Just move on and run La Rosa like I need it?"

He hooks his arm around my shoulders and directs me through the front doors. "Well, you're still a La Rosa, so why not?"

"The wrong one, though," I grumble, swiping my eyes.

"Look, the elders are inside with a couple of the other outfit members and commissioners." I stop walking. "Hear me out. You know we have to handle this in-house. As much as Wicked is a descendant and technically a made man, this can't involve the MC. You know this." I do. He doesn't have to explain anymore because I knew that the second Papa—Victor—came clean with everything.

My stomach drops to the ground as I enter the foyer. The familiarity is no longer a solace, it's a pain of what I thought I had. A pain for the little girl who was lied to. My eyes shoot up the grand stairs and I wince.

“The pope has blessed the house and we got it cleaned for you. I know you don’t want it, but it’s yours.” I ignore him and make my way through the hallway and to the family room, where I hear chatting.

It pauses when I stop at the threshold, and all of a sudden I’m a child again, looking up to my aunts and uncles like they’re my superheroes. This could go one or two ways. They could hate me, kill me, or they could take me in and guide me. I don’t know which is worse.

“Bubba.” My aunty, Gio’s mama, pulls me into a gentle embrace, kissing the top of my head. She was closest to Mama. Always around, cooking and baking together.

I squeeze her back and go through each of them before finally taking a seat on the lounge in the center of the room. The very one Mama used to sit on. “I’m sorry for what happened and how it was handled.” I place my hands on my lap, straightening my shoulders. “Unfortunately, he didn’t give us much choice and managed to ruffle the feathers of the Bratva, there was no way around taking him off them.” No one speaks, and I go around the room, meeting all of their eyes. My uncles are old school. When I say old school, I mean in every single way.

“You are to take over now, Ruby Rose. There’s no getting around the fact, you know that, right?” My uncle ends in Italian. I knew this was coming, and in the back of my mind, I think I knew there was no way I could escape it. I don’t have the luxury of choices. I have the luxury of death, murder, crime, and the family I have around me.

“I understand, yes.”

“Good,” Uncle Tommy says, leaning back against the leather chair and resting his ankle on his knee. “You know there’s no escaping, baby girl, and we love you. We are your family. We do not claim Victor’s choices nor did we know what he was doing. We thought you were his child.”

My aunty sniffls, wiping her nose. “Your mama would kill him herself.”

“What do you need me to do?” I ask them all, looking around the room. “I think I have a few soldiers still on, but I will need to source one I can trust implicitly like I did Val—”

“—fucking Russian.”

I ignore his stab at my best friend.

Gio enters farther into the room, sitting on the armrest of my chair protectively. “We will get that handled. You need to bring your family back

here and take back that throne before the vultures slither in.”

“We know you can do this, Ruby Rose. You are far better than Victor was. You gained respect on the streets, respect you worked to get just by being yourself.” Uncle Tommy stands, buttoning up his jacket. I gaze around the room at the rest of my uncles and aunties, the commissioner who nods in agreement.

He speaks. “This is agreed upon within the commission too, Lala.” They all share the same somber expression, but they’re right. I can take this. If anything, I want to just to slap it on Victor’s rotting corpse that I can.

“Okay. I will do that.” I watch as they all leave, except Gio, who is staying behind until we have men stationed back on the property. Walking toward the fireplace, I toss in a few pieces of wood and kindling, taking the matches off the mantle and striking up the flame before flicking it in.

“I need answers on Mama, Gio. It doesn’t make sense why someone would kill her. I know Victor was a monster, but he didn’t do this. I know it. Everyone knows it.”

He comes up behind me, holding a freshly poured glass of tequila. I smile up at him, taking a sip of the honey liquid of Don Julio.

“What about Skully? We don’t know much on him, so I have a few people working on tracking him down. No one can hide that well.”

Turning around, I take a seat on the mantel just as my phone vibrates between my boobs. “Shit.”

“Answer it. May as well rip off the Band-Aid now.”

I swipe the arrow across my phone. “I know.”

“Ruby, I’m going to fucking kill you if you ever pull that shit again.”

“Sorry.” I wince. “I got a text from Gio, Wicked, and you know—”

He breathes out a deep breath, and guilt takes hold of me. I should have probably texted him when I got here. “I know. What happened?”

“Looks like we’re moving in here.”

“Mmm. Figured as much.”

“Blood in—” I stare off in the distance. “Blood out.”

Wicked is silent for a few seconds. “Baby, this is probably a good thing. I know you’re not feeling that right now, but you should take back the power he tried to steal from you.”

“I know,” I answer, looking up at Gio. “They got the house cleaned and soldiers are being transferred here as we speak. I’ve got a lot of work on my shoulders, so I’m going to have to spend the next few days trying to find a

nanny since I always had Mama.” I hold my breath. “Are you going to move in too?” Wicked and I have never defined anything with our relationship, mainly because neither of us has had to. We simply existed inside one another whenever the other was around, as if no time had passed.

“Not right now, baby. I’ve just taken the gavel here, I need to stay around and make sure everything is tied down. Then I will be able to, okay?”

My heart sinks, but I understand why. “I get it.”

“Alright, we’ll bring everything over tomorrow. Just crash there for the night and I’ll bring Wolf then. Someone there with you?”

“Gio.”

Wicked chuckles. “Little fuck.”

“Not so little anymore!” Gio calls out loudly. How the fuck he heard is beyond me.

“Okay, I’ll see you then.” I hang up the phone and place it down on the mantel.

“What’s up with you two, anyway? That’s a whole lot of damage between two humans. I don’t know how you both made such a cute kid.”

Shaking my head, I reach for the packet of smokes on the coffee table, placing one between my teeth. I stare up at the ceiling, stark white, with wooden pillars. The art Victor chose still hangs on the walls, and anger bubbles beneath my skin. “We’re going to rip this house up a little before tomorrow.”



Twenty-Nine

Wicked

There's a secret I've kept from her.
And when she finds out, there's no coming back...

OceanofPDF.com



Ruby

“This is much better.” I look around the house, placing my hand on my hips and swiping my forehead with the bandana I tied to the front of my head. Gio and I did most of the work around the house last night, but this morning we had soldiers already sanctioned at the gates, front doors, and out back. Part of my clearing everything out was removing anything that reminded me of Victor. I didn’t want any reminders of him in the house at all.

“What time’s Wolf getting here?” Gio asks, opening the fridge and taking out a pitcher of orange juice.

“Tonight. I need to restock.”

“I don’t know,” he teases, swiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He places the orange juice on the counter. “Whoever did this restock did a good job.”

“That’d be me.” Juno waves, rolling up his suit sleeves and entering the kitchen.

Juno is around mid-twenties and has a reputation that follows him. I guess it’s why my aunt and uncle sent him to me.

“Thanks, Juno,” I say, smiling. “I do need to head into town, though. Necessities for Wolf.”

I sweep up my handbag. “Don’t get into trouble while we’re gone.”

Shampoo, conditioner, soap— “I forgot laundry detergent. Wait here with the cart.”

Juno looks over my shoulder. “I don’t know...”

“I’m in Walmart, Juno. Nothing is happening to me in here.” I don’t give him a second to answer before I jog off down the aisle, searching for the detergent aisle. *Junk food. Refrigerators.* A rug is held over my mouth and everything goes black.

This isn’t like the last time. It hurts more. My head aches, my body numb. I can’t feel anything around me.

“Ah, you’re awake...” Skully comes into view, and I blink my eyes to look around the space. A wooden cross, hedge lining maze, torches burning with fire, people gathered around me wearing white or black robes. The wind whooshes through the air and I stare up, distracted for a second, watching as the thick branches sway, dancing with the wind.

“What do you want? I know everything,” I say harshly, but my throat burns like I’ve swallowed acid.

“Ah...” He steps in front of me, and I look through the eyes of his metal mask. “I doubt he would have told you everything.”

“What do you mean—” I shuffle, tugging on the ties knotted around my wrists. They erupt with pain when I move, and I peek up over my shoulder to see blood dripping down from the rope.

“Now.” Skully removes the hoodie from his head.

“Stop,” a voice echoes from behind him, and I panic when I find Wicked. “Let her go, Skully. It’s me you want.”

“Actually,” Skully points to both of us. “It’s both of you.” My chest rises and falls as my heart thrashes against my ribcage. Shaking my head, I whisper. “No. Why are you here!”

Wicked ignores me. “Take me instead, Skully.”

“I don’t want you, Wicked. I need her. She is the only one who can save her.”

“Save *who*?” I scream so loud my throat aches.

Wicked's legs falter, and he raises his arms to the side. He's shirtless, his jeans and boots with nothing else. His arms widen like a bat, desperate and precise. "I pledge my loyalty to you, Skully. To you only. For as long as I live..."

My brows cross in, and I twist, attempting to pull myself out of the binds around my ankles. "What the fuck is happening?" The pain is now burning the core part of my brain, the area I can't feel.

"You would go against her?" Skully asks, and I watch as Wicked takes calculated steps closer to the wounded man kneeling at Skully's feet. The people surrounding us part, turning to look at one another in shock.

"I would go against her, *for her*." Silence stretches out through the air, and I feel my heart fracturing in my chest like thin twigs between my fingers.

"And what of what I needed from Ruby? What then?"

Wicked's head is dipped, the muscles on his neck throbbing, the sweat. "I brought you a gift. I need to grab a piece of paper out of my jeans back pocket—" Before he can finish his sentence, someone reaches in and snatches it, removing his mask to read the words. He looks around Wicked's age, with soft features and chubby cheeks.

His eyes rest on Wicked before they find Skully. "There's another."

Skully steps forward, swiping the paper off him and reading the words.

Wicked doesn't waste time. He looks partially over his shoulder, and I follow his sight as Royce drags in a young girl with blonde curly hair. She doesn't look familiar, and for a few seconds, I wonder who she is.

"This—" Wicked rises to his feet, squaring his shoulders. "Is Jesenia La Rosa. The twin sister of Ruby. You didn't know who she was when you thought I killed her." My blood turns to ice and my stomach drops to the ground. "She's a match, Skully. Use her, take me, and let Ruby go. I'll be the greatest fucking Hangman." Wicked looks to baby-face beside him, rolling spit in his mouth before aiming it toward the ground. "Like I always have been."

"I must do my own checks before I let her go," Skully says, slowly removing the mask around his face. "What happened to Victor?"

Wicked reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone. He flashes the bright screen on Skully's face and I squint my eyes to see better. Victor's headless corpse lying in a puddle of blood.

Wicked raises his brows. "Let her fucking go."

Skully clicks his fingers and a couple of the people wearing robes move forward, taking the young girl off Royce and dragging her back against the forest clearance. The more I sit up here, the more I recognize things. The forest where we saw someone burning on a cross, the cabin houses. No doubt the asylum is not far from here. They must have all moved back.

“I have to admit.” Skully lowers himself onto the chair in front of me. “I’m sure going to enjoy this part while we wait for my proof.”

“What part?” Wicked asks, his lip curled. Royce steps forward, his arm on Wicked’s as I feel someone brush against my side.

I flinch, instantly repulsing away from whomever it was but I collide with another. Shaking my head, I whisper, “You fucking touch me and I’ll kill you.”

Someone brings a blade to my clothes and tears off my yoga pants and shirt, until the cold night air wraps around my exposed skin.

Wicked roars forward, but baby-face steps between him and Skully, who is seated in front of me.

“Nope.” Skully shakes his fingers. “If you do that again—” Skully stands, turning toward me and I try to pacify my breathing. My chest rises and falls as I choke on the oxygen that refuses to let up inside of me.

He swings his hand back before it collides with my cheek and a loud crack.

Wicked launches forward again as someone to my left cuts my panties off, and another hit flies across my face. “Keep going, Wicked, and I’ll be releasing a corpse to you.”

My eyes find his and everyone else dissolves around me. All that exists is him and I and the monsters that live inside of both of us. I take in deep breaths, holding back the tears that threaten to roll down my cheeks. White noise pierces my ears as I feel hands run up my inner thigh while another grabs at my breast. I hold his stare. He tugs at his hair, the veins in his neck popping as he screams so loudly I don’t hear him.

“It’s okay,” I whisper, knowing he can read my lips. “It’s okay.” I nod. “I love you.” Then I squeeze my eyes closed. Someone steps up from behind me, forcing my legs wide open as another pair of hands finds my pussy. Evil penetrates every exposed area of my skin, and no matter how much I fight against it, I submit. Submit to the shame, the agony, and the heartbreak.

The man behind me rubs the tip of his cock against the crack of my ass, as the other beside me digs his fingers inside of me. I feel the hard edges of a gun run over my jaw, just as he forces his cock into the entrance of my ass. I bite down on my lip to stop myself from screaming as I feel the tissue around my ass tear apart. Tears roll down my cheeks, but I won't scream. I won't breathe out anything that will give them the satisfaction. My knees give way as he gains momentum, forcing his way through as dampness slides down the backs of my thighs. The hard edges of the gun are being forced into my mouth and I open wide, losing track inside my own mind. I let memories of Wicked and me lead me down the road of survival. I don't know how many minutes pass.

"It's true!" someone says in the background, but my mind has turned to TV static, the kind that doesn't know which way it wants to go. "She's a match."

I don't know if they've stopped touching me, because it doesn't matter. I can still feel them on my skin. In my mind. Against my soul.

"Well, that's great." Skully stands to his feet, I'm guessing, since I can see his boots in my view. "So you kept it from me that she had a twin and didn't think to tell me all these years?" Skully's back is to me. "Why?"

"Because I knew this day would come."

"But your jobs had to be completed or I would have killed Poppy? Poppy is everything to you. You would really risk her life for a girl who you simply only saw being carried into the asylum?"

I don't want to hear his answer. I roll into a ball and cradle my knees to my chest.

"For her, I'd risk it all."

"Interesting," Skully whispers, clapping his hands. "As you are aware. I've had some time to play around with my projects." His words die out. "And for some time, I always wanted you, Ruby. Do you know why?" I don't, and I'm not sure I want to. I want to scream and cut his body into little pieces, but instead, I roll tighter against my body, unable to move. "Because you're the cure for me. A perfect match, since I'm dying."

"Now you have a replacement. Take your other daughter."

Thirty-One

Wicked

I can't bear looking at her little body curled up in a ball. My blood boils to a breaking point, but I know what I need to do to make sure we all get out of here alive. Give the girl back that I saved all those years ago...

We all knew why Skully did what he did. Why he ordered me to kill off the ones who weren't viable. Whether he took from them after for the black market or passed them to K Diamond, who knew, but we knew why he was doing it.

A piece of paper slid beneath my door. Rolling up from my bed, I snatched it and unfolded the piece.

444

I didn't know who was in 444, but whoever it was, was just another victim to Skully, and it was my job to fulfill that or Poppy would be next.

I grabbed the machete that was leaning against the wall and made my way down the long, dark corridor. Door after door passed when I finally squeezed the handle and pushed it open.

My eyes flew between the girl tucked into the bed sheets and the woman standing beside her bed. I knew she was too old to be a member here, but

also too young to be an elder. She wore dark black pants, and a black hoodie, with the hood drawn to cover her face.

She jumped when I closed the door behind myself, stepping back from the young girl curled in the bed. "I'm—"

"—who are you?"

She shook her head. "Please don't hurt her."

"Who are you?" I repeated myself, tilting my head to search her body, looking for any kind of familiarity. I took another step and she dropped down onto the sleeping girl on the bed. "Answer me or I'll kill you."

Her head shook from side to side as she stood from the bed and came straight to me desperately, her hands on my cheeks. "Please spare her."

"Why should I do that?" I snapped, looking over my shoulder. This could get Poppy hurt, especially if I was seen talking with someone I should have killed the second I stepped foot in this room.

"Because she's his daughter too. Please. Free her. Let her go."

I stifled a laugh. "Not happening, lady." I went to step backward, my hand on the door handle when her words stopped me in my tracks.

"It's her sister. They're both his daughters, but he doesn't know about this one. I know you know who I'm talking about because I know that Victor has been here. I know what he is doing with Ruby." Her name was Ruby?

"I don't give a fuck about her," I said honestly, and it was partially the truth. I was definitely interested in her.

"Lie." She lowered herself onto the bed, and for some fucking reason, I stopped what I was doing and turned back to her. "Your real name is Vittorio Amante." My brows tugged closer, but she had my attention. I never knew shit about my parents, only that they dumped me here when I was four. The woman lowered her hoodie to the sides of her neck, and I felt my shoulders relax. Something about her felt warm. I had never been near anyone of this kind of goodness, except her. "Your father was the capo of the Amante Cosa Nostra, and a standing member of the committee. When you were a child, my husband killed him and your mother, and framed the Russians, started a decade long war." Her eyes traveled up to me. "You are drawn to my girl Ruby because you knew her. You spent every day around one another right up until your parents murder. Slept in the same crib. Shared the same breast milk at one point because your mother's stubbornness refused to put you on bottle milk."

"Ehh..."

“Sorry.” She folded her hands on her lap. “I guess you won’t remember and maybe not believe me.” She stood and pulled out something from her back pocket, handing it to me.

I switched hands with the machete, taking the photo from her and looking down at it. Two babies wrapped tight in their own little blankets but facing each other during sleep. One was larger and a little older than the other, and to the side of the smaller baby was a single rose.

“Her middle name is Rose, but she doesn’t know that. I’ve always told her it was just Ruby La Rosa, but it’s actually Ruby Rose La Rosa.” Tears fell from her eyes. “Like me.”

Flipping the photo, it reads **Ruby Rose & Vittorio**.

“This could be any baby.” I handed the photo back to her, but she ignored me, turning back to face the curled up girl in bed. She’d be drugged out of her mind no doubt, which was why she hadn’t woken.

“You know it’s not, Tori.” Even as she said a name I had never heard before, my breathing thickened, as if my soul had recognized it. “This is Ruby’s twin sister. They’re his children, Tor. His. His girls.”

“You had that psycho’s babies?” The anger that erupted inside of me was unwarranted, and I knew that we only had a few more minutes before I was going to have to show them a body.

“It wasn’t consensual.” The words fell from her lips, unwashed. “Victor gave Ivy to the Russians as a payoff. She had been with them since. I couldn’t do anything about it, but when I heard that Anton Volkov had dropped her here and discarded her with the hopes that Skully wouldn’t know who he was killing, I needed to step in. I need to save her.”

“Well, that may be the case,” I said, dragging the tip of the machete down the cracks in the floors. “But I still need a body.”

“Take me...” she said, pointing to the girl. “Just kill me and it’ll buy her enough time to run.”

“She can’t run anywhere!” I pointed toward her. “She’s drugged up on a concoction of fucked-up shit.”

“Tori, the day that it happens. Where Victor collects you and brings you into our house, you have to protect Ruby. At all costs. He has been plotting her death since the day she was born.”

I walked toward the window, flicking off the latch. “Just get out.”

She grabbed the girl’s small and frail body, and it’s like seeing a complete replica of the girl I saw being carried in. “Hurry up.”

As soon as the window slammed closed, I counted to one hundred before popping the latch open and spreading it wide. Skully never had any kind of sanctions stationed anywhere because no one tried to run. It's hard to run when you're drugged.

Opening the door, I came face-to-face with him. His white eyes and withered skin. "Where is the girl?"

"Gone." I blinked. "Came in and the window was open." I stepped past him. "Maybe it's time to invest in some security and tweak that drug recipe?"

I would keep my word.

I'd protect Ruby La Rosa any way I saw fit because I believed her. Hopefully she wasn't difficult in order to do that.

"You what?" Ruby blinks up at me after I explained to Skully what had really happened that night. "You can't give her to them, Wicked."

"Shut up—" Skully's hand flies through the air, connecting with Ruby's cheek.

I launch forward, my hand around his throat, shoving him backward. Gunshots fire off in the distance and it's not until I have Skully pressed up against the cross that I realize the rest of the Cosa Nostra are here for backup.

I squeeze his throat so hard I can feel bones crunch beneath the palm of my hand. "Oh, I'm not making this easy for you, or quick." Tossing him to the ground, Khaos steps forward and yanks him up by his hair.

"Sorry, brother. We ran into an issue at the entry point."

I clench my jaw, twirling my finger. "Take these two fuckers too. Throw them in the same room as Skully." Then I reach for Ruby, an arm curled around her back as she falls into me.

I wipe the blood from her cheek and scoop her up in my arms. "I'm sorry, baby. We had to be careful."

"Don't be sorry. It's fine." She jitters in my arms and I know she's not fine. She's tough as shit, but what just happened isn't something you just move on from. Any fucker who lays a hand on a woman without her permission dies by the fucking sword.

I take the steps toward the back of the forest clearing, where it opens out onto the asylum at the front. He is smart. Do it here because he wants me

here, only he doesn't expect the distraction of Ivy, which gives us enough time.

"Baby?" As soon as her voice drifts through the air, Ruby's body stiffens in my embrace, but then relaxes. "Give her to me, please."

She stiffens again, this time bringing her head up off my chest and straight ahead to where a black SUV is parked.

"Mama?"

Pearl La Rosa's arms stretch wide as tears roll down her cheeks.

Ruby bounces out of my arms and crashes into her mother. "Mama?" Her wails burn every single inch of my skin and I open the back doors, sliding them inside.

I go to close them in when Pearl stops the door, her warm eyes resting on mine. "Thank you, Vittorio. I will always be in your debt for taking care of all of us girls." I decided a long time ago that Pearl would be the only person who would ever be allowed to call me my birth name.

I smile gently at her, pressing a kiss on both of their heads. "It's what I do, remember?" I close the door gently and turn to see Val standing near the curb, a cigarette in his mouth.

"I want fucking in."

"Jesus Christ." Shaking my head. "You know I get that Ivy is yours and Mikhail's little plaything, but Ruby is more than that to me, Vasili Kozlov."

Val steps closer to me, flicking the cigarette down onto the ground. "I respect that, but I was beside that girl for years, Wicked. I loved her like she was one of my own even though it went against everything I was raised to do." I clench my jaw, baring my teeth.

"Fine."

Reaching the door handle, I stop. "Thank you, by the way."

"For what?" Val flashes me a smirk.

"For always looking after her. Even with Victor. I know you and Mikhail both did that for her, whether you want to admit it or not. You knew her being involved in killing him would have been too much for her, because even if she meant nothing to him, she spent all her life loving him."

Val smiles sadly, and I know the words got to him. "He never deserved her."

"We know." I slide into the driver's seat. "The clubhouse."

Val nods his head, turning when movement catches our eyes as Mikhail carries Ivy over his shoulder. Val steps forward to help and I drive the car

away from the curb, needing to get both Pearl and Ruby all the fuck away from this mess.

We haven't got onto the highway when Ruby pipes up. "Where is she?" Pearl's eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror.

"She's with her family, Ruby. Like you are right now. Go to sleep." I squeeze the steering wheel as Juno shuffles in the passenger seat.

"Why the fuck did it take so long for you all to get here?" I clench my jaw so tight my teeth crack. I'm a second away from exploding and killing someone, preferably Juno since he's closest.

"We ran into a problem."

"A bigger problem than me?" I keep my tone flat.

"Unusually, yes."

"What is it?" I snap, turning to face him.

"You want to do this now?" Juno turns over his shoulder slightly.

I sigh. "Yeah, no. Wait."

"Fuck you. Yes, do it now!" Ruby snaps from the back seat. "I did not just get beat up and—for you to not tell me what the hell is happening too."

Juno clears his throat. "Okay. We ran into a problem at the entrance. Turns out, before Papa La Rosa died, he put a bounty on the head of the entire La Rosa family in the event of his death."

I can't stop the growl that leaves my mouth. The anger is primal now, and I'm about to drive straight to the clubhouse instead of dropping the girls off. "Continue."

"He used someone who is renowned for getting shit done post-death. He only takes jobs of that caliber as it's more money." I'm aware how it works and I don't bother to tell him how.

"So, how did you stop him?" I ask, turning to look at Tobias. When he doesn't answer and the lights from the highway light up his face, I glare at him. "You *did* stop him..."

"Yes and no. It wasn't him who was waiting for us there, it was a man called Niko Davis. You know him?"

"The Antichrist?" My eyes drift onto the road ahead of me. "Yeah, I know of him."

"Turns out, you have a hit that you're to complete after his old lady is..."

"Happy, in love, and married," I finish his sentence. "Was one of the last Hangman posts I got. I have to wait for when she least expects it. I didn't

know it was his old lady though, I just know her name and have the photo of her and the date he wants it done.”

“Well, they found out about that hit...”

“Yeah, I get it. They want me to squash it.”

“Yep. They’re hoping for a truce between the two of you and want to meet with you.”

“Did you get his details?” I ask, looking over at him.

“He will meet you where you say.”

“Do it,” Ruby says from where she lies on Pearl’s lap. “They could have killed us all and they didn’t. I’m so sick of the shady dealings of the underworld.”

“Honey.” Pearl brushes her hair back. “You recover and go back when you’re ready.”

I’ll do it, but it will be on my terms. I know of him and the crew he keeps. They’re similar to WP, but I trust no one but my family and my club.

For good reason.

After dropping the girls off at the clubhouse, because all Ruby wanted was to be there, where she felt most safe and where Wolf was, Khaos, Royce, Psyko and I make our way to the back barn where it is partially burned to the ground. I don’t want to take any more, needing to know that the clubhouse is safe and secure for them.

“You know how you wanna do this?” Royce asks, and our eyes connect, a smirk on my mouth. “Should I even ask?”

“I don’t know, *Sicko*, should you?”

“You’re both terrifying, but I would like to play too.” We stop at the entrance of the barn, where Val stands with a lit cigarette between his teeth.

“Told you that you’re not doing this without me.”

I push through the entrance just in time to see Psyko and Kirby tying the last man up by his hands onto the pillar. They’re all stripped and naked, gags in their mouths.

I reach into my jean pocket for my cigar, rolling it around my teeth. “Take out their gags. I want to hear them scream.”

Psyko rips out the gags in their mouths, and I start walking around Skully. “Val, you can take one of them. I’ll have the other.”

Royce pulls a chair out, taking a seat behind us to watch the scene play out. Truthfully, I’ve waited for this moment since I was old enough to know

how rotten Skully was.

“Wicked, Wicked, Wicked... Oh, what a mess you are.” Skully clucks his fingers and I continue to roll the cigar between mine.

“Psyk, got any nails? Big fuckers?”

“Yeah, I think we’ve got some in the barn for the horses. I’ll be back.” I kick the dust around my feet, the ashes of burnt Irishmen beneath the soles of my shoes.

“Roy, put some music on. Don’t want the girls to hear.” Royce walks out to the parked car, the headlights flashing through the dark barn and lighting up the bodies of all three of them hanging from their wrists above their heads. He drives the car farther in, leaving the door open and pressing play on a metal song. Making my way to the other one hanging, I drag the tip of my knife down his chest, stopping right above where his cock meets his pelvis bone.

“No. No. Please—no!” I dig the sharp tip into the base and slide it across slowly, inhaling his blood-curdling screams. As soon as I reach the curve of his helmet, I bring the handle of the knife to my mouth and bite down, rubbing my thumbs beneath the flap of skin before tearing it all the way back. “Skinless.” I laugh from around the knife before grabbing it out of my mouth and diving it into the base of his sternum. In one movement, I slice him down the apex of his chest, all the way to his pelvis and watch as his screams turn silent and his blue eyes widen on me. The clean incision on his chest quickly spreads open and blood splatters out, his organs spilling out and landing on my boots.

“Well...” I lean down and push through the tube of his intestines and liver. “You want any of these, Skully? Gotta admit, they look fucking good.” I stand back to my feet. “Roy?” I call over my shoulder. “Got a flashlight?”

Royce snickers, jogging up behind me while turning on the flashlight of his phone. He keeps it on the now empty corpse and I move his skin out of the way until I see his ribcage. Fisting both sides, I tear them apart and reach in until my hand wraps around the organ that beats against the palm of my hand. Tearing it from his chest, I toss it up in the air and catch it. Making my way to the front of Skully.

“You’re fucking crazy, Wicked.”

I smirk up at him. “I know, Skully. Especially when you mess with her.”

“What are you going to do, huh? You can’t hurt me.”

“That a challenge?” I toss the heart onto the dirt ridden ground just as Psyko jogs back into the shed.

“Found them!” He holds up four large, thick nails. “And this.” And a heavy hammer.

I falter backward, taking them from him while keeping my eyes on Skully. “Remove the ties around his wrist but hold him in place.”

Psyko and Royce jump up on a couple of chairs, doing as they’re told. I block out everything else happening behind me when I line the nail up against his wrist, right over his most prominent vein. I draw the hammer back before slamming it down onto the heavy metal. His scream is instant and excitement grows inside my body. I hit again. And again. Blood squirts out and onto my face when I finally feel the hardness of the wood behind his hands.

Jumping off the chair, I force his feet together, pressing them against the wooden pillar and start my work.

Bang. Bang. More blood. Every hit, I feel everything that he has done to me over the years slowly seep out of my body.

I stand straight, dropping the hammer to the ground and tearing off my shirt, adrenaline cursing through my veins so wildly every demonic entity that resides inside of me comes roaring to the surface to play.

“Roy,” someone whispers.

“Leave him. This is Hangman.”

I stumble backward and watch as his blood drips down and hits the dirt. His screams turn into wails, and I know I’ve hit a main artery somewhere because he’s fading too fast.

“Fuck!” I spin around to find Royce. “He’s fading.”

“Well.” Royce smiles his boyish grin. “There is the meat grinder.” He’s right. That shit has got to be painful. I yank the nails out of his feet as Psyko and now Val takes the ones out of his wrist. His body falls to the ground in a thud and Val picks him up with Royce on the other side.

“To the back.” His feet drag across the dirt as I lead them to the back of the half burned barn, thankfully not this side, and I call out to Royce. “Light!”

He points his phone onto the heavy metal machine. “It’s manual. Satisfying enough?”

“Yeah.” The machine sits against a back wall, where saws, knives, and other metal utensils are hanging on the wall. “Who the fuck did this?”

Psyko shrugs. "It's my play area."

Mine and Royce's eyes lock for a moment, before I tell them to throw him on the table that moves toward the grinder when I start turning it. "Feet first."

The fact that he's in pain is enough for me. Crucifixion is like lightning electrocuting you inside out. The nerves in your feet are linked to different areas of your body. It's fucking painful, but not satisfying. I had planned to drag this out longer, but thanks to my erratic beast that lives inside of me, I got too excited and hit an artery I shouldn't have.

I bring both hands to the metal handle as "Psychosocial" starts blasting out of the car and Psyko starts dancing around in circles. The chaos only adds to the electric atmosphere, and when his feet meet the grinder, the handle gets harder to turn. Royce jumps on the other side where an identical one sticks out. We both roll it forward and Skully launches up from his lying position, the whites in his eyes now bloodshot red.

Val forces him back down as we continue to roll him through. I peek over my shoulder to see the remnants of his minced corpse fill the barrel. When we hit the middle, his chest expands and his mouth opens unnaturally wide as blood and minced organs spill out between his lips.

I snicker. "Nowhere to go."

"Love when that happens." Psyko leans down near Skully's face, dipping his finger into the mush exiting his mouth and drawing an upside-down cross over the center of his forehead. Royce and I keep rolling him through until finally we get to the bottom of his chin.

I stop, scanning his face. "Almost wanna take a shot of this and hang it on the wall of fame."

"Fucking hell." Val swipes the sweat off his forehead. "You always this messy?"

"No," I shake my head before unrolling his neck and picking up his head, bringing it up to my face. The skin of his neck flaps against my arms as the tube from his throat dangles farther down. Tossing his head into the barrel, I look back at Val's man.

"Jesus... you skinned him in that time?" His bare muscles are exposed, no sign of skin or even a recognizable face.

"Yep. It's my specialty."

"Same as Royce." I chuckle. Stepping back, I fall onto the chair that Royce was on. The music still plays loudly, and Val taps my shoulder in

passing as he makes his way back to his car.

"It gets better," Royce says, taking the chair beside mine. "One day at a time."

"Yeah, I just hope she doesn't make it too difficult for me."

"Oh, her?" Royce doesn't hide his loud bark of laughter. "Hell nah, brother. You're fucked with that one. I was talking about being president."

"Asshole."

"Brothers, though." Royce taps my fist with his. "Through it fucking all."

I hit the light off in the bedroom, careful not to wake Ruby. I washed all my shit off before coming upstairs. There ain't no way she will ever come near that piece of shit again.

"You okay?" Her voice slaps me across the face, and I wince. She rolls out of bed and her little hands come to the front of my stomach.

I move away from her, but she grabs me by the wrist and turns me back around to face her. "Don't do that."

"I just put our friend through a meat grinder, Ruby. I don't want to touch you straight after doing something so fucking heinous."

Her wide eyes search mine as she rests her palm on my cheek. "I need you." My willpower wavers and I lower my lips down to hers, kissing them softly. "I need you to replace what they took from me." Swallowing down the anger, I pick her up gently and move her to the bed, knowing that Wolf will be in Mama's bed.

I slip the straps of her silk gown over her slender shoulders, sucking little kisses over her jaw. "Are you sure, baby?"

"I need this, Wicked. I need this from you, please."

"I'll go gentle." *For once.* Finally bringing my lips to hers, I run the palm of my hand down her sides, planting kisses down her neck and sternum. Rolling my tongue over each nipple, I'm careful to watch her cues. Any awkward silence and I'm out. Her back arches, her lips rolling into her mouth to bite on her moans. I keep kissing down until I'm on my knees in front of her.

She massages my head with the tips of her fingers and I reach behind and grab her ass, forcing her pussy onto my lips. I gently run my tongue over the nub of her clit as she starts riding my face. Only on my knees for one person—ever.

“Wicked,” she whispers my name between her moans and I shove my briefs down over my cock and grab it in the palm of my hand. “I’m going to come.” Dragging my hands up her thighs, I cover my whole tongue over her clit and apply even more pressure. Her knees shake and the grip she has in my hair tightens as she crumbles to the floor beside me.

“Fuck.” I catch her, wrapping my arm around her body and leaving a kiss on the top of her head.

“No. I’m not done.” She pushes up from my embrace and forces me onto my back by my chest. “My turn...”

I don’t want to do this, but I know the sooner we get this meeting over with, the sooner both of us can move forward. The girls are all out shopping for Gracie’s kid’s party this weekend, so I called it here.

“You think they’re going to cause problems?” Chaos asks, handing me his little cigarette.

I shake my head. “Nah. We both want the same thing.” Two minutes later, the loud sound of hot pipes roar down the road and drive straight through the opened gates. Five of them in total, all wearing their cuts.

The one at the front climbs off first, removing his helmet. “Niko Davis.” I jerk my head up at him and he lowers his helmet onto his bike.

“Wicked the fucking Hangman.”

I gesture toward the tables near the octagon. “Sit. Let’s talk.” Both our crews hang back behind us. Niko offers me a cigar and I take it from him. “Cuban.”

“Heard it’s your favorite.”

I clip the end and slide it over to him. “I’ll start by saying you have my word that I won’t carry the hit out on your old lady. But how do I know the La Rosas won’t be touched?”

Niko flicks the tobacco out of his mouth. “Because that was also my hit. When I saw who it involved at the gates, I figured out what was happening.”

“Why you taking on hits?”

“Why are you?” he asks, brows perked.

“I’m not now. That was old. Your old lady’s ex came to me with a photo and a date he wanted it done. It’s not for years from now, when she’s happy and married and settled.”

“Fucking bastard.”

“I’ve already burned it. I’m not planning to take any new jobs. Got my fucking hands full.”

Niko chuckles. “Yeah, I bet. Mafia wife, MC president.” He leans his elbows on the table. “I’ve burned her from mine. You have my word. I know that may not mean shit to you, but I think we understand each other.”

I nod as we both rise from the table. Niko looks over his shoulder as they make their way back to their bikes. “Hit me up next time you’re in my town. We’ll have a beer.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, alright.” It’s not until they’ve taken off out the gate that I toss the cigar onto the ground.

“You believe that?” Royce asks, coming up beside me.

“I do.” My jaw clenches.

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Thirty-Two

Ruby

The clubhouse is decorated with pink and purple party lights, and the kitchen is filled with little finger foods and cakes.

Betty rushes through the doors with Wolf on her hip. “He’s getting heavy. What the fuck?”

“What the fuck!” Wolf repeats.

I glare at my best friend, taking him out of her grip. “Aunty Betty...”

Betty slides up onto the kitchen counter, stealing one of the club sandwiches and biting into it. “There are too many kids out there. I only like one kid.”

I rush around the kitchen, gathering up the spoons for the Jell-O and placing Wolf back onto the ground so he can go and play. “Be nice.”

“I am!” Her hand comes to her chest in offense.

I reach beneath the cupboard until my hand comes to a large plastic bowl. “Fucking Psyko doesn’t count, Betty!”

Standing to my feet, my eyes meet hers. She glares at me. “Okay, that’s fair.” We both make our way back through the kitchen and to the outside patio. Wicked catches my waist with his arm, directing me down the stairs.

“How you feeling?” He bites into my shoulder. “Like you want another baby with all this chaos.”

I pull back from him, face scrunched. “Excuse you! No fucking way.”

His head tilts back in laughter. “Alright, alright.” We moved into the main house two weeks ago now. Not long after Skully’s death, he decided he never wanted to leave my side and could run the MC from home. I didn’t mind that he spent most of his time here, so long as it was me he was coming home to. And he did. Every single time.

“Hey.” Wicked brushes my hair behind my ear. “Are you happy, baby?” I place the tray of sandwiches onto the table beside us and reach behind his neck, leaning up on my tippy toes until our lips brush against each other.

“I will always be happy so long as I have you and Wolf.”

“So toxicity turned into I love yous?” he asks, the corner of his mouth turning up into a grin.

I bite into his bottom lip. “I’m probably going to continue to hate you until the day I die, Wicked, but that’s just you. And that’s me.” I place a gentle kiss on his lips. “And that’s also all you get.”

He laughs, scooping me up into his arms and throwing me over his shoulder.

“Wicked! It’s a kid’s party!”

“Fuck them. I need to be inside you right now.”

He jogs us up the stairs, his shoulder digging into my ribs. My cheeks sting from my smiling and I don’t think I could ever say that I thought we would end this way. How we are. We have a love that burns, and everything that burns eventually turns to ash, but somewhere between the I hate yous and the I love yous, I’ve found a love so powerful it will continue to burn after the flames die out.



Ruby

Christmas

The clubhouse is glittered with traditional Christmas colors. Kids are on the playground, and bikes are parked at the front. I direct my new Rolls Royce under the car park, straightening the mirror to see Wolf's wide eyes already on mine.

"Mama, is Papa here?" Wolf sees him every second of the day when Wicked isn't doing club business, but it'll never be enough for Wolf. Wicked is his hero, the dark knight who came in wearing a torn cape.

"Yes, baby." I reach for the handle, pushing the door open as Mama unbuckles him from his seat.

Betty rounds the car after sliding out of the passenger seat. "You know, I'm totally proud of you and everything that you've accomplished."

"Can you not?" I raise my brows at her. "You're sounding like Mama."

Betty hooks her arm with mine. "Well, you know, we are the wiser ones." We make our way to the clubhouse, ignoring the groups of people at the front. Not intentionally. My mind isn't here right now. It's still with the job I just came from.

Before I've reached the steps, Wicked rounds the corner, his eyes finding me instantly. "You alright?" Ma takes Wolf over to the playground with Lion's old lady and Jade's mom.

"Yup!" I flash a wide smile at him, sliding beneath his arm.

"I'm going to find eggnog." Snow is powdered everywhere outside, I honestly don't know how the hell the kids are outside.

Wicked closes the door behind us and I shiver, removing my long trench coat. "Get me one!"

"Hey!" Wicked's hands come to my arms, turning me toward him. His dark eyes search mine and as every second passes, the guilt builds deeper and deeper inside my gut. "What's wrong so I can kill it?"

I place a gentle kiss on the palm of his hand. "Nothing. I promise. I just had something to do before I got here, and well..." I shuffle out of his grip and place my handbag on the counter. "Let's just say it wasn't fun." The clubhouse looks completely different to what it usually does. Jade and the girls did it good. I probably should have been here to help them, as Wicked's old lady, but I think they all understand my schedule.

"Wanna talk about it?" he asks, kissing the top of my head. The door closes behind us as Mama and Olivia walk back through.

Shaking my head, I rest on his shoulder as he pulls me down onto his lap. "Nope." His arm wraps around mine protectively. Wicked and I went back and forth on how we would do Christmas. He wanted to spend time with the MC, but I just wanted something at home. We came to an agreement for Christmas Eve at the clubhouse and Christmas Day at home. Everything is already organized for tomorrow. We have Gio, Marcu, and my aunt and uncle coming, as well as Val and Ivy. I still haven't met her yet. Mama said that she hasn't wanted a lot to do with our family since finding out what Victor did when we were younger. I guess she's decided to burn a bridge to come tomorrow. Or burn a bridge when she gets there. I watch as Royce and Jade cuddle in the corner, Royce nibbling on her neck.

"Guys!" Jade wriggles in Royce's lap. "We have an announcement!"

My lips curl between my teeth as I take the eggnog Betty hands me, taking the spot beside Wicked. I already know what she's going to say before she says it.

"We're having a baby!"

"Oh fuck," Wicked jokes and I push up from his lap, dragging her off Royce to give her a hug.

“Congratulations, baby mama.” I smirk into her ear. “I hope it’s a girl.”

“Nope! Fuck that!” Royce points his finger at me. “Bro, don’t fucking say that!”

I shrug, dancing my way back onto Wicked’s lap. He bites my earlobe. “Our turn next.”

“Mama!” I scold her as she cusses in the background about her roast chicken. “It’s Christmas. We don’t care about any of that. Come sit down.”

She rests her hands on the counter, her shoulders lifting and lowering as she takes in deep breaths. My hand comes to her frail arm. “Mama, what’s wrong?”

“Why haven’t you asked me, Bubba? Why haven’t you asked me my role with P—” She pauses. “Victor.” I rest against the counter, crossing my ankles together and dazing off into the family room where the giant Christmas tree almost hits the high ceiling. Lights and decorations drape around the branches. It looks so good. I can’t believe Gio and Wicked did all of that on their own. Without killing each other.

“Mama, I may not know what happened between you and Skully, but I trust Wicked.” I tilt my head, tracing the lines on her face. “I trust him more than anyone in this world, and I know he knows what happened between you both, and I know that if he thought you weren’t good, you wouldn’t be allowed near me.” I squeeze her arm. “You can tell me in your own time, or not. That is up to you but, Mama, I love you. That’s your trauma that you carry. You do not have to share it with anyone else unless you’re ready to do so.”

Tears fall from her eyes and roll down her cheeks. “I wanted so desperately to get us both away. When you saw me packing my bags, Bubba, it wasn’t because he was sleeping with other women. I used that because the truth was far too much for you to bear.” She finally looks up at me, her blue eyes twinkling with unshed tears. “I was trapped. Something I am sure your sister will not understand.”

“My sister—” I wipe her tears away from her cheeks. “Will learn to understand.”

“She’s with the Bratva, Bubba. Don’t trust her.”

“Mama.” I hide my chuckle behind a smile. “I trust Val. She will be fine.”

Mama waves me off, swiping her tears with a dishcloth. “Go entertain the family. I’ve got this.”

I leave Mama in the kitchen, finding Gio, Marcu, and Wicked in the lounge with Gracie and her daughter. Gracie doesn’t have family, so naturally, she became ours. The doorbell rings and my eyes fly to Wicked.

“Baby... play nice.”

“I’m always nice,” I mumble, reaching the doorknob and swinging the door open.

Val is standing there with a wide smile and arms wide. “Principessa...”

“Valerie...” I let him pull me in for a tight hug, breathing in his cologne. The man is fine as hell... he’s just lucky Wicked...

When he pulls me back, his hands fall from my arms before he turns to the person beside him.

Long blonde hair, blue eyes like Mama, and skin that matches my tan. She’s not a complete replica of me, but you see the similarities. “Ivy.”

Her face cracks into a smile. “Hi.”

I step forward, wrapping my arm around her neck and pulling her in for a hug. A little more awkward than the one with Val, but I don’t expect anything else. “Come in.” I step aside and gesture into the foyer, eyeballing Val as he enters with a cheeky grin.

Uncle and Aunt are behind them, so I give them a quick kiss and gesture inside. Uncle glares at Val the entire time, but they’ve agreed to play nice. Since our settlement with the Russians, and with a La Rosa in their arms—literally both of them—I can’t imagine them wanting trouble.

Closing the door behind me, my eyes land on Ivy, who is standing against the staircase, watching me. Everyone else has disappeared and it’s just the two of us.

“Val told me everything. I’m sorry what you’ve been through with, well
—”

“—that man?” I lift one eyebrow at her, gesturing to the spot on the stairs. She lowers herself down, folding her hands on her lap. She’s wearing a white turtleneck knitted dress that stops just above her knees, and a single diamond cross around her neck. Her hair is pulled back into a high pony, showcasing her soft cheekbones and bright blue eyes. She resembles Gigi Hadid more than me. The polar opposite in every way.

“Can I ask you something?” she asks gently, and I don’t know what I was expecting meeting her for the first time. I guess the thing that scares me

most is that she is going to be exactly like me. Then we'll most likely kill each other. But she isn't. She is the polar opposite and it is—refreshing.

“Of course.”

She shifts her body inward, giving me her whole attention. “If you had known about me before, would you have done something—anything to help me?”

My heart squeezes in my chest at her wide, doe eyes. Resting my hand over hers, coffin-shaped black nails against her soft pink. “Ivy, there’s only one thing in this world that I will kill and be killed for, and that’s family.” I touch the long curls over her shoulder. “And that includes you.”

She breathes out a relaxed deep breath. “Okay.”

“What’s it like there, though? I mean, I love Val. Trust him too. I can’t imagine him being a problem?”

“Oh, no, he isn’t. It’s—”

“—Mikhail.” I snicker, shaking my head. “Last I heard, you three were like a... thing?”

She scrunches up her little nose. “Yes... and no. I mean, we are, for the most part, but it doesn’t come with Mikhail’s challenges. For one, he likes to upset me. Gets off on it, mostly.”

“So are you all together, or are they yours, not each other’s?”

“They are mine,” she whispers, blinking slowly toward the kitchen. “Val is consistent. Mik is a problem.”

“Well...” My hand comes to hers. “Good luck with all of that.” We both laugh as we make our way to the sitting room, where Gio is dancing to a remix of Mariah Carey’s Christmas tunes and for the kids. My uncle is rolling his eyes at his disappointment and Wicked reaches for me, dragging me onto his lap. During all of the years of us both fighting one another, we didn’t realize we were tying the knots that bind us together. Love, hate, they’re both energies. Even now, as I watch my family laugh, joke, talk among each other with smiles on their faces, a sense of peace flows over me. We’ll rebuild our family. This home. And if anyone tries to come between that...

Well...

Christmas Eve before the clubhouse

Ruby

“Why the fuck am I here?” I slam my door closed before Juno can do it for me, treading through the snow in my Prada boots. “It’s Christmas Eve and I need to be at the clubhouse.”

“I know.” Mikhail leans against his Aston Martin, arms crossed.

“You come alone?” I raise a perfectly arched brow at him.

“Seeing as I have your sister, I’m going to say you don’t want to piss me off.” I ignore his threat, meeting him at the hood of my own car. I reach into my pocket and take out a cigarette. Mikhail makes me fucking nervous. The deranged bastard.

“Well, hurry up, then... what is it?”

He tilts his head in a way that I know I’m not going to like the next words that leave his mouth. “What I’m about to tell you cannot go back to Wicked. Under any circumstances.”

I blow out a plume of smoke, eyeing him up and down. “Why?” I don’t bother to tell him he can forget it. That man knows everything there is to know about me, and that’s not by choice. He tears every secret away from me by the fangs of his teeth.

“Because you’re going to betray him.” I choke on my smoke, but he continues to glare at me with seriousness.

“What is it?”

“The night we got you away from Skully, another MC was there, waiting to take the whole La Rosa family out. They had been hired by Victor in the event of his death hit. The MC decided to make a deal with Wicked instead, since they had suspicions that their president’s old lady’s ex had that same plan for her, and Wicked confirmed he had taken the hit. You know how we men can be.” Mikhail’s eyes darken. If he wasn’t so classically attractive, this wouldn’t be a problem. He would be hard to say no to a lot of people, but because I fuck Wicked on a daily, no one stands to him.

“Right... keep going.” I wave my hand at him.

“They came to a truce that neither of them will do it, but there’s one problem.”

I straighten my shoulders.

“It fell to my man. Now, you know who he is very well.”

Val, I whisper to myself in my head.

“And you know he doesn’t miss.”

“What the fuck are you asking of me, Mik?” I flick my cigarette onto the snow.

“I’m telling you that if Val does it, she’s a dead woman on that date. He doesn’t share compassion with civilians, you know this.” I do. Shit. “Now when this happens, you and I both know that that MC is going to start a war with Wolf Pack.”

I blow out a deep breath, resting my hands on the hood of my car. “Fuck.”

“Unless you take it instead, but you have to go through with it. I don’t know what kind of strange shit her ex had going on, but he was thorough. She will die on that day.” He hands me a black envelope.

I take it, opening it wide. “How do I know it won’t go to someone else? How do they know that I do it?”

“Blood.” He smiles widely at me.

“I can’t go to the fucking clubhouse bleeding. Wicked has the nose of a fucking sniffer dog.”

“A prick...” Mik rolls his eyes, handing me a needle. I prick my thumb and press it onto another piece of paper that Mik is holding, sliding below the thumbprint. “It’s a one-million-dollar job. A lot of people want it.”

“Well, they can’t now!” I snap, tucking the envelope into my jacket.

“Correct.” Mik’s eyes come to mine before he rounds his car and leans on his open door. “Try to make it believable. No fucking leg or arm shots.” He fires up his car and skids out of the parking lot.

“You okay?” Juno asks, opening the back seat for me as I slide inside.

“No.”

No, because I’m going to have to fulfill this hit without Wicked knowing while making it believable.

I open the envelope, reading over the date.

I’ll see you in twenty years, Meraki.

Triggers:

Cannibalism

Dubious consent

Sexual Abuse

Blood & Gore

Breath play

Blood play

Self-harm

Extreme violence and explicit murder scenes

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