



King of Depravity

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: Stalked by a psychotic billionaire...

Waitressing isn't a calling, it's a way to pay for my art degree.

Until Killian Smith walks into the bar and turns my world upside down.

It isn't that he's drop-dead gorgeous.

Rich.

Powerful.

It's that he's unhinged.

I know the dead look in his eyes. I've seen it before.

And he sees me too. Every night is some twisted game of cat and mouse and he's drawing closer to catching me.

Until one night when I step into a back alley and I'm a witness to a Bratva murder.

There is only one man I can turn to for help.

The one man who petrifies me is the only one who can protect me.

Killian Smith.

A beautiful monster.

He'll keep me safe.

But what will he want in return?

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PROLOGUE

Killian

“For fuck’s sake, Kill, it isn’t nice to play with your food,” my brother Gris growls into the phone.

I don’t answer. That’s the thing about being in a dark alley, spying on a secret meeting. Talking isn’t really an option.

So, I don’t.

Though, to be fair, I might not have answered anyway. I’m a do-what-I-want kind of guy.

“Are you going to eliminate this problem or not?” he rumbles. “I’ll do it myself if you’re not up to the task.”

He’s baiting me. That’s brotherly love for you. We both know, of the two of us, I’m the killer. Not him. It’s in my fucking name for fuck’s sake.

That’s when I hear his fiancé, Arabella, give a sleepy call. “Is everything all right, Gris?”

“It’s fine, baby.” My brother sounds like a fucking twat, the way his voice takes on this coddling tone when he talks to her. “Are you cold? I’ll be right there to warm you up.”

“Jesus,” I whisper, rolling my eyes in the dark.

“Are you judging me, you crazy fuck?” I hear a door open and close on the other end of the line, he’s clearly moving to another room. “You’re supposed to get rid of Preston Wingate. Stop fucking around and get it done.”

I hang up.

I don’t answer to Gris, but he ought to know, I always do my job.

In front of me, I watch the weekly scene play out.

That fuckwad, Preston Wingate, takes a large bundle of money from a very tattooed, very large Russian.

I lean against the wall, watching it all go down.

I’m not playing with my food.

Not at all. Preston Wingate is a problem that’s about to solve itself. He’s mixing with the Russian Bratva here in Vegas, attempting to sell Kincaid secrets.

I’m a crazy motherfucker and even I wouldn’t dare make an alliance with the Russians.

On the bright side, these Bratva assholes are for sure going to kill Preston themselves. I’ve listened in to several of these meetings and Preston doesn’t actually know anything of value, and the Russians are getting pissy as he continues to take their money.

“You told us that last time,” the one I believe is named Alex spits at Preston. “And it

isn't anything we couldn't discern from public record."

Preston is shifting, his pasty fucking face getting even paler. "That's right, motherfucker," I whisper. "Dance like the bitch you are."

It's not that I mind killing. But Preston isn't even a challenge. Stupid, weak, I could have killed him a hundred times in the last two months. But it would be boring.

And besides, these Russians are shaping up to be the real hunt and the longer Preston lives, the more I learn about my family's newest enemy.

I already knew they liked this piano bar. One of them is some sort of fucking savant, and he comes here to play. I was scouting out the place and watching the Russians after they stole a deal on a casino right out from under us.

But my attention on the Russians had been diverted when my brother Gris decided to take Preston's fiancé, Arabella Kincaid.

I've got to be honest, Preston was almost smart. Almost. Marrying the Kincaid princess might not have given him access to their secrets, but it would have given him control of Arabella's shares and a seat on the Kincaid board.

We are making money hand over fist in Las Vegas, but the Kincaids...they are the current kings, the absolute winners in the Vegas real estate game. Not for long...

I digress. Preston got cocky, thought he had the girl in the bag, and got himself a sidepiece before the wedding had even happened.

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Enter my brother. Gris is the kind of handsome that makes girls go mental. Preston Wingate never stood a chance. In a matter of days, Gris had broken up the engagement and claimed Arabella for himself.

That part that shocks me is how sincere he seems about her. How earnest. She must have a magic pussy.

None of my brothers are men with a lot of emotional depth. Me least of all, but that's a completely different and really fucked up story.

What matters is that when Arabella broke up with Preston, he beat the shit out of her. And people think I'm a sociopath.

That's when Gris decided that Preston had to die.

Imagine my luck when my two projects—the Russians and Preston Wingate—became a two-for-one.

And the fact that they'll kill Preston, while I learn how to take them out? Could the situation get any better?

But that's when I hear the door from the restaurant that leads into the alley rattle. Fuck.

One of the staff must be taking out the trash.

The Russians are ruthless and anyone who gets in their way disappears.

Which is fine by me, I couldn't give a shit about who dies, as long as it's not her.

There's this one waitress who I can't help but watch every time I'm here. It's the way she moves, the sound of her voice, the curve of her smile. Chloe, is what the other waitresses call her.

I still haven't decided if I want to fuck Chloe or dirty her up in far less wholesome ways, but I have no intention of letting these fucking Russians put their hands on her before I decide.

The Russians melt into the shadows and Preston ducks behind the dumpster.

A cook comes out, whistling as he goes, tossing two large bags up and over the side of the dumpster.

The sound of them hitting the bottom echoes through the alley, as the cook goes back inside, locking the door behind him.

As for me...

I've seen enough. If the Russians don't take care of Preston in the next week, I'll do it myself.

He's ceased being useful to both me and them. Poor pitiful Preston.

I'll keep watching the Russians right here at the bar. It's been very handy, what I've learned here.

And then I can keep an eye on Chloe too. What did Gris say I was doing? Playing with my food?

A salacious grin tugs at my lips. Yeah. That sounds about right. When it comes to my little waitress, I think I'm definitely ready to play and it's... Game. On.

CHAPTER ONE

Chloe

"Sweetheart," some swinging dick from the corner booth waves a hand at me. He's like most guys in this place with his slicked-back hair, expensive Italian loafers and a gut from too much pricey bourbon hanging over his equally expensive belt. "Another round."

"Of course," I smile and nod as I turn and hustle to the bar. Mike is working tonight and he's one of my favorite bartenders because instead of also being a jerk, he's funny. "Hey, Mike, two more Macallans, please."

"Twelve?" He responds with a wink.

"Oh no, those guys only drink it if it's been aged eighteen." I smile back.

He shakes his head with a low whistle. "Good tips for you tonight."

I hope so. I need them. While the spring semester is almost over, I've got one more to go in the fall before I graduate. I have to pay monthly in order to cover the costs my scholarship doesn't, so it basically means I'm always making payments to the school and my next payment is due next week. And that's the late deadline.

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I set the snifters of bourbon on my tray, and straighten my fitted black oxford, smooth back my tight ponytail, before I plaster a smile on my face.

My black dress pants are painted on as I traverse the large room in my stilettos. They hurt like hell, but I get better tips when I wear them.

In the corner, the regular piano player stands, inviting one of the “guests” to play a song. I’ve heard the guy before.

A tatted-up Russian, one of the other girls told me that all the tattoos on his fingers are because he’s Bratva.

I don’t care what he is, his whole table tips well. I wait on them as often as I can even though they simmer with the kind of tension that makes me uneasy. But not enough that I’d quit being their waitress. That is until two weeks ago...

One of the Russians makes a habit of grabbing my ass, and he slipped me his number, so I’ve been hanging back, letting other girls serve the table their drinks. I’ll have to wait until he’s lost interest before I can start waiting on them again.

It’s hurt my bottom line, but I know better than to get mixed up with guys like that. Better to stay out of his orbit for now.

So instead, I serve the Macallan to the two middle-aged swinging dicks.

The music begins—the Russian who likes to play is truly special on the piano, his skill so far above any of our players.

I'd like to stop and listen, but instead I lean over the table, setting the first glass to the guy on the inside corner of the booth.

That's when his friend places a definite hand on my ass.

I don't react.

I don't do anything but keep smiling.

I'm not above allowing a guy to cop a feel so that he leaves me a good tip. But that is where I draw the line. They can go home and screw their wives. I'm not for hire.

But as he gives my right cheek a big squeeze, I straighten, adjusting away, as I place his Macallan in front of him. "Here you go, sir."

"Thank you, darlin'," he drawls, his face already a bit ruddy from the liquor. "Tell me something," he starts, leaning closer with a look of hunger in his eyes. "Are you looking for a good time?"

Crap. These situations have to be handled delicately so as not to make the customer feel bad and stiff me from my tip. "Serving you gentlemen drinks is plenty fun," I say with a husky laugh, before I turn and go, leaving both of them also laughing in my wake.

I've got a mezzo soprano tone to my voice, and I know lots of guys dig it. My hair is a dark honey blonde, and my eyes are green, but my skin has a sun-kissed bronze to it, thanks to my mom's Mediterranean heritage.

Coupled with a generous backside, I get my fair share of male attention. Not that I date. I don't. Ever.

I'm too busy, and even if I wasn't...

Shaking off these thoughts I keep working the room, serving drinks as the night grows later and the patrons more drunk.

I bring a round of vodka to the Russians when Callie has to serve a group in one of the private rooms. My stomach flutters but I push my nerves back down as I approach the table.

The one who asked me out, I think his name is Alexander, gives me a long, heavy stare, his tattooed fingers flexing around his glass, as I keep my smile as generic as possible.

That's when the hair on the back of my neck stands up.

I straighten. My instincts are always dead on, and I can sense that danger is close. Scanning the room, I catch the shadowed gaze of a lone man in the dark corner of the room.

I hate that guy. I don't know his name. I never wait on him, but he's here nearly every night. Sometimes he only stays for a bit, sometimes all night.

The other waitresses say that he doesn't drink much but he tips really well, as they giggle about how gorgeous he is.

I don't give a crap about his looks, the guy still creeps me out, which is why I usually give his table to the next girl in the rotation. Even I'm not desperate enough to interact with him for good tips.

He looks at me now, his dark eyes empty and unreadable. I know that look.

It's the look of a man who has no soul, who will hurt anyone or anything not out of malice, but out of joy.

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That's the scariest motherf' er of them all.

He raises his glass to his lips, and I catch the tattoos that cover his massive hands. He's tattooed like the Russians?

Come to think of it, he only seems to stay when they are here. I shake my head, sure I don't care. The less I know about that guy the better.

But that's when Alexander slides out of the booth and stands next to me. I mean right next to me. Like there is barely an inch between us. He drops his head low, his hot breath against my neck and ear. "You didn't call."

My smile slips as I duck my head. I'm tempted to tell him that I lost his number, but that only pushes the problem down the road.

Instead, I shift the tray to my left hand, sliding away from him, and placing the little plastic disc between us. "I should have told you when you gave me your number, but I don't date patrons of the bar. It's..." I'm searching for the appropriate word. It's not nepotism because I am in no way powerful.

But it's not good for business either. "It's against the bar's policy," I finally manage to come up with an excuse, looking up at him with an apologetic smile.

His eyes narrow as he reaches for my tray, moving it out of the way so he can step close again. "You need to understand, printsessa," he says in his thick accent, "that I am a man who gets what he wants."

I swallow down a lump. He needs to understand that this isn't happening. Ever. "I can sense that about you," I murmur and he gives a low, appreciative laugh. "But my boss would fire me." And then I give him my most vulnerable eyes, the ones that ask for forgiveness as my lower lip juts out the smallest bit. "I really need this job."

He eats it up. I can see him shifting to be both sympathetic and appeased. It's not his lack of appeal, but my circumstances that kept me from calling.

My mom can make nearly any man do anything she chooses. It's disgusting. She's on husband number four, and this one is going to stick. Rich and drunk most of the time, she has unlimited access to his credit cards as she feeds him drink after drink.

I will never be like that. I've promised myself this a million times over.

But I do understand the principles of what she does, and I occasionally use her techniques to keep myself out of trouble. That's it.

He eases back into the booth, and I start hustling away. That's when dark and dangerous in the corner meets my eye again and raises his hand to beckon me over.

My heart stops for a second.

I'm normally way more careful about not meeting his eye, but the Russian has me flustered.

With a gulp, I make my way over to him. "Can I help you, sir?"

He leans over the table, out of the shadows and my breath catches. Holy shit, he's even better looking up close.

It's not that every feature is perfect. But every part of him works together to create

this beautiful masculine man from the crook in his nose, to his cut jaw, to the bulging muscles highlighted by the fine cut of his dress shirt.

His dark hair waves back from his face and the straight line of his brow. Only his eyes give him away.

They do not sparkle with anything. They're devoid of light, making him look almost...dead.

I take a half step back, swallowing down a lump, realizing he's assessing me too and he hasn't answered my greeting, so I repeat it. "What can I help you with, sir?"

"What did that man just ask you?" His voice is a low gravelly baritone with a rich English accent that doesn't disguise that his words are not a request. They are a demand.

I bring drinks with a smile and without question. I do not gossip about patrons with other patrons. "Sir, I don't think?—"

His hand shoots out to capture my wrist. His grip is just tight enough that I feel his power, know that he could hurt me whenever he chooses. "Tell me what he said."

I hesitate for another second and he tightens the grip, my whole body tensing as I ready for the pain. "He asked me out."

"And what did you say?"

I shake my head like this is crazy, because it is. Not that I don't know crazy, or how to handle it. "I said what I always say, no thank you."

His grip loosens, but he doesn't let go as his thumb strokes along the inside of my

wrist.

I'm so over stimulated from the whole interaction that my skin breaks out in goose pimples from his touch. "And if I asked you out? What would you say?"

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“No thank you.” It’s out in a rush betraying my true feelings and not at all in keeping with my normal façade. But his touch is breaking past my surface calm.

He gives me a grin and it’s positively wicked. I cringe away. “And if I told you that I don’t take no for an answer?”

“That’s what he said too,” I whisper, knowing that I am doing a much worse job of handling this conversation than I did the last.

Maybe it’s been too much maneuvering through male attention, or maybe this guy unsettles me like no other.

But his lips thin over his teeth as he tugs me down closer, bringing my face right to his face.

His scent wraps around me, and I have to be honest, he smells delicious. It’s cedar and spice, with a hint of male musk that makes my heart beat a little faster. Or maybe that’s just the fact that he’s got me bent over the table. “And how did you answer?”

“My boss doesn’t allow me to date patrons.”

He finally lets me go. “Is that what you’re going to say to me too?”

I jerk my chin in the affirmative.

Reaching into his back pocket, he pulls his wallet out and lays three hundred-dollar bills onto the table. “You are waiting on me the rest of the night. Bring one whisky

every hour, water in between.”

I pick up the bills, slipping them into my small apron as I turn to do as he bid.

“Chloe.”

That makes me stop dead in my tracks. How does he know my name? We don’t wear nametags.

I glance back over my shoulder, showing him my profile without making eyes contact. “Yes?” My voice is barely a whisper.

“You can try to deflect. You can run. You can even hide. But you will bend to my will, luv. I don’t take no for an answer.”

Fear steals my breath and for a moment I don’t move. Then, I unstick my feet from the floor and scurry toward the bar, trying not to break out into a full run.

My instincts are never wrong, and that guy is a psycho.

CHAPTERTWO

Killian

I stay until closing, keeping one eye on the Russians, the other on Chloe. She’s running scared like a little mouse, staying close to the wall, trying to escape my notice.

Like that’s possible.

I’m a man who operates in the shadows. She can’t hide in that place, it belongs to me.

The Russians finally leave, so drunk they stumble to the door. Some nights I follow them. I know loads of their secrets at this point, so tonight, I don't bother.

I know where each of them lives, know where their office is located. I've even learned several of their drug drops. I'm thorough.

I rub my thumb and forefinger together, remembering the feel of Chloe's skin. She was so fucking soft, like silk under my rough palm.

I meant what I said, one way or the other, she's going to give herself to me. I don't have much of a moral compass, even my family senses it, and they treat me differently because of it.

Most women don't notice, they're too busy looking at my tattoos or my muscles. Not that I pay them mind. But Chloe skittered away from me, her eyes darting here and there as she tried to map an escape. She senses what's under my façade, and she's running scared. She should be afraid. I'm a predator.

I don't make a habit of terrorizing women. But just watching Chloe brings out a primal interest in me I've never felt before. It will be exercised one way or the other.

I watch her cash out, the bartender handing her any tips that were given on charge cards. I know I only drank about forty dollars of liquor, so she got a fat tip from me.

She did as I asked, delivering my drinks precisely on the hour. I didn't touch any of them. I don't drink, lowering my inhibitions any further is a terrible idea, but I need to order drinks to remain at the table.

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She got smart in her delivery, bringing them to the opposite side of the table from where I'm sitting.

Chloe is gorgeous with thick hair that her tight ponytail doesn't disguise, and dark green eyes. She's got a decent rack, but her ass is fucking fantastic and watching her walk away from my table over and over was a treat.

She finishes with the bartender, who gives her a goofy smile as she shrugs on an old leather jacket and unties the apron, stuffing the cash into a pocket on the inside of the jacket.

She takes one bill out and puts it in her regular pocket. Noted. I rise from the table, skirting around the wall to avoid being seen.

It's got to be close to two in the morning and only one waitress remains, attempting to shuffle her last customers out the door so she can leave.

Keeping to the shadows, I follow Chloe out onto the street. I keep far back, the tap of her high heels making her easy to follow.

We move from the downtown bar into the slums of Vegas where vagrants set up entire camps on the street.

It's a shit neighborhood and no woman should be out on these streets alone.

I watch Chloe until she turns onto a street full of rundown apartments and then I stop, waiting to see which one she enters.

But that's when I see the shadows shift.

My muscles tighten and I stop, narrowing my gaze.

Chloe senses it too and she turns, just as a man jumps out of the shadows.

"Give me all your money," he barks, waving a knife.

"What the fuck, Darrel?" she huffs even as she pulls the bill from her outside pocket and holds it out to the guy. "If you don't knock this off, I'm calling the cops."

"Fuck off, Chloe." He snaps the bills from her fingers and waves the knife. "You call the cops the next time, I'll slit your throat."

I've heard enough.

I'm moving again, not disguising my steps this time. I don't know what I want from Chloe, but I am sure as shit not going to let her die until I figure it out.

The guy hears me and spins, holding the knife out in my direction. Not slowing my stride, I bat the knife from his hand then grab him by the throat.

His stench hits me, the smell of a person who hasn't bathed in a long time. He's thin. Frail.

Probably an addict. Vegas is full of them. He crumples to his knees. "Don't hurt me," he whimpers sounding completely pathetic.

"Give the lady back her money," I grit out between clenched teeth.

"It's fine," Chloe says holding up her hands. "It's no big deal."

I think back to when she put that one bill in her pocket. The one she gave this guy. She knew he was going to rob her. She planned on it. How much does he steal from her?

I reach down and grab his wrist, squeezing until the mother fucker opens his palm. It's a twenty. "How often do you give him a twenty-dollar bill?"

"How do you..." She shakes her head. "What are you even doing here?"

My lips are thin over my teeth as I give the guy a good shake. "Get the fuck out of here. You steal from Chloe again and I'll slit your fucking throat."

I let go.

The guy lurches to his feet, falls, gets up again, and stumbles away. He's left the twenty on the ground and I pick it up, holding it out to Chloe. She doesn't take it. her eyes are wary as she takes a step back.

"How much money has he taken from you?"

She shrugs. "It's not a big deal. He uses it to eat sometimes."

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I shake my head, closing the distance between us, before she can start up the stairs. Wrapping a hand around her waist, I pull her against my body. She feels so fucking good.

I don't have a lot of sex. Even though women offer it, I just... I'm not usually interested. But Chloe is different. The moment her body presses against mine, my cock is raging hard and my brain is buzzing.

"Twenty a night for how many nights?" I ask, watching her for signs she's lying.

"I don't know. Four, five times a week."

"For how long?"

She's trying to push away, but I hold her firm. "A year and a half."

I do some quick math. "That's nearly seven thousand dollars."

She lets out a long breath. "It's easier to just give it to him."

"Not anymore. I just scared him off." I spread my hand out over her back which I've worked under her jacket. The wad of cash she stashed inside the coat brushes my hand.

"Thank you?" she says trying to wriggle away. The wriggling is even nicer than the pushing.

“I’ve saved you two thousand dollars just the rest of this year.” I say. “Understand this is a service that people pay me to deliver.”

She goes still, her eyes growing wide. I can’t see their green color in this light, I can barely distinguish it in the intimate lighting of the piano bar. I’d like to see them in the light of day. “P-pay you?”

“Now I happen to know you’ve got money in your pocket.”

She starts to tremble. It’s not my intention to frighten her. Then again, I don’t really care. Either way, I am going to get what I want from her.

Using my free hand, I reach into the jacket and extract the wad of bills. Must be close to a thousand dollars here.

“What?” she squeaks, grabbing for the money. That’s when I push her belly against mine, the thump of my hand stealing her breath.

“I just performed a service for you. This is my payment. As a waitress, I think you understand.”

“But I didn’t ask you to, and...” I hear the catch in her voice. “I need that money.”

Now we’re getting somewhere. The feel of her against me is fraying at my normal control and I massage a circle on her back, the feel of her stomach against mine, making my balls so heavy. “Listen. I’m not unreasonable.”

I hear her soft snort. “Right.”

A grin curls one side of my mouth. “You paid me for a service just now. You want this cash, you perform a different service for me.”

A tremble moves through her entire body. Then she freezes like a little bunny being hunted. I'm not even sure she's breathing, she's so motionless, and I thump her back to make certain. That's when a strangled sound, like the noise of a dying animal comes out of her throat.

It's a sound that I have a fair bit of familiarity with, so I know that I'm about to make the kill.

Only this one is metaphorical. Probably.

"Service..." Her whisper is full of tears. I don't actually like it when women cry. It breaks something inside me.

My hand fists in her shirt. "I won't touch you. I just want to look at you and?—"

"What?"

My brain is buzzing, barely clear. I need release and I think I might need to get Chloe out of my system because she's got me feeling...

Lifting her feet off the ground, I carry her up the steps.

She goes wild in my arms, kicking and scratching. I stop, pinning her to my chest. "You're going to strip off your clothes and let me jack off over that pert little ass. Then I'm going to leave your money and go. Keep fighting, and I'm going to come up with a new, and even more exciting plan."

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“You can’t mean it.” I hear her fear, as she trembles against me.

“I do. Now tell me that you agree. I’m not much for consent but my brothers claim it helps prevent lawsuits.”

“You have this problem often?”

“Never. I can’t stand sensitivity training, so I mind the rules.” It’s true. One day of lectures on sexual harassment in the workplace, and I knew I wouldn’t bother, because that shit made me want to tear my hair out.

“S-sensitivity training?” She’s looking at me like I’m completely insane. It’s a look I’m used to, but I kind of thought discussing workplace training made me sort of...normal.

“So. Are you going to let me cum all over your ass or not?”

“If I don’t, you take my money?”

“My money. I got rid of your habitual thief, remember?”

She freezes again, like the scared little prey she is. She licks her lips. “You...you promise that you won’t put any p-parts of you inside of me?”

“Promise.” I’m not a guy people should ask for promises but that’s her problem. I just want to see her ass naked, and I need to cum like yesterday.

“Fine. I consent.”

I reach into another pocket and pull out her keys.

This is going to be fun.

CHAPTER THREE

Chloe

What is happening? What is actually happening right now?

There is a part of me, the scared little girl who still lives inside me, who wants to beg. Please don't do this. Please.

But I agreed, that's the messed-up part. I told him he could do this.

I've learned the hard way that begging only makes it more fun for the man and worse for me. So, I remain silent.

I need that money.

Mentally, I replay what he just said. He wants me to take off my clothes and then he wants to masturbate. He won't touch me.

How can I trust that? I can't.

But what choice do I have? I try to tell myself that it's a lot like letting those customers grab my ass. I'm not selling myself, I'm just not calling them out on their bullshit so I get the tips I need to live.

Psycho steps into my shitty place that I share with three girls. I'm lucky because I get my own room, even if it is the size of a closet. But it does have a window with a fire escape. I go out there some nights and then I don't feel so trapped.

He stops in the dark living room, barely big enough for a loveseat, which is connected to a tiny kitchenette. He glances down the hall. "Which room?"

"Second on the right," I whisper, trying to keep my voice from trembling. I draw in a ragged breath and remind myself to think. I know this man is completely insane, but I've got more experience than most with deranged lunatics. "I don't know your name."

But I feel him tense rather than relax. "Killian. But my family calls me Kill."

Jesus. They actually call him Kill? Do they understand he's a soulless monster? Probably. I'm shaking despite my best efforts to remain calm. "I have to tell you something."

"What?"

"I've never done this before."

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“Done what? Let a customer spray you with cum?” He opens my bedroom door and sets me down. Slapping the money on my nightstand, he yanks my jacket off my shoulders, and then starts unbuttoning my shirt. I can’t help it, I shrink away.

“I’ve never done any of it,” I whisper, and a tear manages to slip down my cheek. I don’t like being vulnerable in front of men, so I don’t date, I don’t have sex, I don’t even flirt, except for at the bar and that’s more of a professional courtesy.

“Never done any of what?”

I try to consider the angles. Should I lie? Will my words make him want to hurt me less or more? But he’s stripping me raw, and I can’t think straight. “Anything with a guy,” I whisper. “I don’t date.”

He undoes the last button of my shirt and pulls it down my arms. I’m still in my heels and pants, my plain black bra exposed to his view.

He stares at me then, his nostrils flaring before he reaches up and places his thumb on one of my ribs, his hand wrapping around my rib cage.

I jerk back. “You said no touching.”

He bares his teeth. “I meant no fucking. Take out your ponytail.”

My hands shake uncontrollably as I reach up and pull out the elastic. I’m trying to remain calm. The elastic gives and my hair tumbles down my back.

But his eyes aren't on me. Instead, he's staring at some of the pieces I've hung on my wall. "Who painted these?"

My hands fall to my sides again as I swallow. No one sees my stuff. "I did."

He looks at me then, his gaze still unreadable in the dark, but something in his energy shifts. Calms.

He steps around me and walks up to the first painting. My arms immediately wrap around my middle, like that will somehow protect me.

But I do pivot toward him, watching as he studies the piece. It's a self-portrait of my face but it's broken into several pieces and scattered across a cement floor of a dark basement.

He moves to the second, a red room where I kneel on the floor, my head hanging low, painted in all hues of blue.

A third landscape, a picture of the campus where I take classes. People say landscapes are emotionless but when I first arrived here, I loved the quad. I felt immense joy to be free from my past and to be here to learn.

Every stroke of that landscape I made with love.

He turns to look at me and for the first time, I see a spark of something real in his eyes. They dance with fire. It's just a moment, and then it's gone. His eyes shutter, go black, all I feel is the emptiness.

"Take off your pants."

My throat is so tight, I can barely swallow. I try to undo the button, but I can't get my

fingers to work.

With a rumble of frustration, he pushes my hands away, undoing them himself. Then he's peeling them down my legs, squatting in front of me to get them down my ankles.

"Lift your foot." I do as he commands, turning off the part of my brain that feels, just following his instructions like a robot. It's easier this way. But instead of removing my pants, he takes off my shoe.

"The other one." I do it, and he takes the shoe off, the smallest sigh escaping my lips to be out of the shoes. I can't believe I let it escape my mouth, that I gave him the satisfaction of knowing that something felt good.

He's still bent in front of me, but he looks up then, his fingers resting on the back of my calves. "You smell delicious."

My lips part, trying to decide how I feel about those words. It's so weird, I'm being forced to serve this guy, but my body responds the smallest bit. Like I feel my sensitive flesh between my legs twitch, notice that my scent gets stronger.

He smells it too. "I want to taste you."

"No."

He rumbles out a protest, but I shake my head. "You said no touching."

He stands, not bothering to take my pants the rest of the way off as he undoes his belt and then shucks his fitted slacks down his thighs.

His junk springs out from between the open slit in the bottom of his dress shirt and I

gasp in a breath. “That cannot be normal sized.”

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This, of all the things I've said, draws a smile from his lips. "Nope. I've got a giant cock."

I try to step back, forgetting my pants are around my ankles. I start to fall, my arms flailing.

He easily hooks my waist, and for a second he brings me back to upright. A sigh of relief starts to fall from my lips, but it's cut off as I start falling again. This time, I'm tipping forward, and in a move I can't even comprehend, I find my belly pressed to his powerful thighs, my ass in the air.

I'm still in my thong, my bra is on, and my pants are around my ankles. One of his hands comes to my ass, his palm coming down on it in a definite smack that makes me jolt in surprise and humiliation.

But he doesn't smack me again. Instead, he just squeezes.

His other hand grips his monster penis, and I look back in time to see him rub his palm and fingers up the length.

It's primal and dirty and I feel like a peeper because it's also...fascinating. I've never seen a man pleasure himself or be pleased and I didn't expect to find it exciting.

But it is. My clit gives a decided throb as I consider how he said he'd like to taste me. Would that have felt good?

I shift my weight, the press of his right thigh, hurting my stomach, but his hand

tightens on my ass to hold me, his thumb slipping between my thighs. He's so close to the ache that's building that I actually have to resist the urge to shift so that he's touching me where I need relief.

Does he understand what I was feeling or does he just do what he wants? Probably the latter, but either way, he brushes his thumb right over my clit. I can't remember the last time I even masturbated so the touch is like an explosion of sensation. I jolt in his lap, but this time it's not fear, but pleasure.

I look back to see his hand flying over his cock, a pearl of liquid collecting on the head. What does the skin feel like? What does his cum taste like?

He brushes his thumb down my seam, the fabric still covering me, which actually makes me feel safer, like I can enjoy it because he can't totally invade my most personal place and I whimper with need when he hits my clit again.

"I would have sucked that little clit until you screamed with pleasure," he grits out as he massages a circle over the sensitive bud.

I'm now picturing him, with his powerful shoulders, leaning forward to bury his face between my thighs. It's so hot that when his thumb rubs another circle, I cry out, an orgasm ripping through me. He's barely touched me. How could I cum like that?

This was not supposed to happen. But I can barely attend the thought as I wilt over his legs, my body completely spent.

That's when he cums, a guttural roar filling my room as warm liquid squirts all over my back and ass.

I lift my head to see the thick rope of it shoot from his cock and land on my skin.

His hand leaves my ass as he spreads the liquid all over the skin of my back, rubbing it in.

I shake my head, trying to make sense of what just happened. Somehow, I'm not surprised that this is the guy who finally makes me feel something. I'm probably just as messed up as him.

But that doesn't mean this was a good idea. It was an awful one, in fact. I should have never...

Then again, I didn't have much choice.

He leans over and licks the skin of my back, tasting himself on my skin. Sick fuck.

"I taste good on you," he grunts like that's an explanation. Like any of this makes sense.

Then he slides his hands under me and lifts me up. Shifting my weight to one of his arms, he pulls down my covers and lays me in the bed, pulling the blankets over my body.

Is he tucking me in?

Without a word, he pulls up his pants, tucking himself into them before he redoes his belt and then he just turns and leaves my room, the money still on my nightstand.

His footsteps echo down the short hall and to the front door. I hear one of my roommates gasp, how did I miss that one of them was home?

I was a little busy...

Killian doesn't say a word to her, but I do hear the front door open and then close. Amazingly, my eyes drift closed.

I just let a crazy psycho stalker finger me while he jacked off so I could keep my own money. I try to avoid trouble, I really do.

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But it's got a habit of finding me. My last thought before I fall asleep is whether or not that's the last time I'll see Killian, or is this just the beginning?

CHAPTERFOUR

Killian

My brother Tristonis droning on about quarterly reports and sales margins. I barely listen.

This is not my part of the business, and I hate attending these meetings. He claims I should know all of this, but I don't know why he bothers. I'm not one of them. I don't have a head for business.

I fiddle with the cup of coffee I'm holding that I don't drink. Caffeine is like liquor for me, it alters me in ways I don't like. I have a hard enough time maintaining control without adding in uppers and downers.

Rush is sitting next to me, leaning back in his chair, while Gris stares at his phone, likely reading texts or looking at pictures of Arabella. I roll my eyes.

We have these monthly meetings out of the office, and in some public space because we're supposed to be bonding or some shit.

Gris grimaces, understanding everything Triston says without much effort. Rush smiles like he hasn't a care in the world. Little shit. Ryker is at the end of the table, looking as bored as I feel.

Of all my brothers, we look the most alike—he's got the same crooked nose and straight brow. We're less classically handsome than Tris, Gris, or Rush. I wonder how that works...

I'm not much for being in public during the day and I swear, Triston holds these meetings specifically to torture me or keep me in line. He'd probably say he's helping me, but that's bullshit.

I turn my cup, considering popping the plastic top off and shooting it down the table at Tris just to see what will happen, when the door to the coffee shop opens.

My eyes lift up and my hands still as Chloe rushes through the door. I watch her hurry over to a table where a single young college-aged guy sits. "I'm sorry I'm late. Super late night at work. I could not get this one customer to..."

I stop listening, my eyes travelling down her body. She looks completely different this morning. Gone is the sleek ponytail and all black clothing. This morning her hair is piled on top of her head in an adorable messy bun, her body encased in a cute colorful little dress, Keds on her feet. She looks younger and toothache sweet. I want to cum all over her again.

"No worries. Did you bring the notes for the Baroque era?"

"Got them," she says in a rush, dropping some books on the table and rifling through them.

"Do you want coffee first or anything?" the guy asks, giving her a completely smitten smile.

"I'm good. Thank you for asking." She waves her hand, sticking a pen in the middle of her hair. "I've got class in an hour and a half. Let's get down to it."

I find myself pushing up from the chair, standing, as I continue to stare.

“What the fuck, Killian?” Triston asks, but I ignore him, picking up my cup of coffee.

I have no idea what I’m even doing. It’s clear Chloe is not on a date, but I have this urge to mark my territory. Make sure that guy doesn’t try anything. Do I plan to piss on her leg? Cover her in more cum?

She senses me and turns, her eyes going wide as they meet mine.

It’s my cue to move forward, stand over her table, as I stare into her stunning eyes. The green is like the color of fresh morning grass on a late spring day. “Chloe.”

“Killian,” she hisses, pushing up from her chair, her eyes tinging with a bit of fear. “What are you doing here?”

The guy’s eyes have gone wide too as he takes me in, starting at my tattooed hands and moving to my massive muscles. I flex my hand, making the ink dance as the color drains from his face.

Chloe puts a hand dead in the middle of my chest and starts pushing me back away from her table and toward my brothers. Once we’re far enough away from the study buddy, she hisses, “You have got to stop following me. Seriously, Killian, it’s messed up.”

I hear Rush cough, and I know he heard her. “I didn’t follow you. It’s a coincidence I’m here,” and then I press my cup of coffee into her hand. “Here. Have this.”

She looks down at the cup, her brow completely furrowed in confusion. “What is it?”

“Coffee.”

“Why are you giving it to me?”

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Fuck if I know. “I hate drinking it, but I get a cup because everyone else does.”

She wraps her fingers around the cardboard insulator, her chin notching up to look at me. “Just like your whisky.” In the flat sneakers she looks small, I want to wrap my fingers around the back of her neck, and pull her close, feel her body against mine. “You’re distracting me from the point.”

“What’s the point?”

“You can’t follow me like this. It’s illegal.”

“I already told you, I happen to be having coffee here. I’m not following you. Today.”

“You want me to believe you’re at the same coffee shop as me pretending to drink coffee?” She emphasizes the word pretending.

It does sound strange when she says it like that. “I’m attending a meeting.”

“Did you happen to be outside my apartment at two in the morning last night?” Her free hand comes to her hip as she tips the coffee cup toward me to accentuate her point.

“Killian,” Triston rumbles from just behind me. I ignore him.

“No. That time, I followed you, and good thing. You were nearly killed at knife point.”

She shakes her head, letting out a breath of frustration. “You are far more dangerous than Darrel could ever dream of being. He only extorts me twenty dollars at a time. You worked out a way to take?—”

I cover her mouth with my hand. I’ll have to go through more sensitivity training if she says the next bit.

But apparently covering her mouth is enough to set my brothers off because suddenly Gris is up, and he grabs my wrist, pulling it away from her mouth. “Killian,” he hisses in a whisper. “What the fuck?”

Triston has come around my other side and reaches out a hand to Chloe. “Lord Triston Smith, President of Smith Real Estate Development, at your service.”

She slides her free hand into his and white-hot jealousy punches me in the gut as she gives Tris this cute little grin. “Lord?”

“Our eldest brother is heir to a dukedom,” Triston says with his playboy smile as he points to me.

Chloe looks back at me, her eyes wide. “Are you a lord too?”

“Yeah,” I say with a frown. It doesn’t mean shit. “So are all my brothers.” And I wave at the table.

Chloe sweeps her gaze across my family, her lips parting in surprise. “You have four brothers who are in real estate development?”

“Yes. Why?”

She shakes her head, turning back to Triston. “Crazy,” she whispers under her breath.

And then louder, “It’s nice to meet you.”

“And you,” Triston reaches into his pocket, pulling out a card and handing it to Chloe. “If you need anything...” And then the fucker glances at me, his eyes full of accusation. “Please call. That’s my personal number.” He points to the bottom line of the card.

Chloe nods. “Thank you.”

“It’s a delicate situation and I just want you to know that we’re happy to help.”

I snarl at Triston, irritated he’s talking about me like I’m not here. Like I’m some problem and not frequently the solution.

Chloe fingers the card, her brows furrowed. “Does your brother make a habit of stalking waitresses?”

I’m sick of their conversation. “I already told you, I did not follow you here, and as for last night, I just like your ass.”

Chloe’s cheeks flame with color as both Gris and Tris step between me and her. Which is really starting to piss me off.

I go to push Gris away, but he’s planted his feet.

I do a lot more fighting than my brothers, but they are strong and scrappy each in his own way. Besides, we’ve got history, and they know my weak points.

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“Jesus fucking Christ, Killian,” Triston mutters as he turns back to Chloe, apparently ignoring me. “I didn’t catch your name, sweetheart.”

I let out a half growl at the wordsweetheart. “Triston,” I push out through clenched teeth. “Watch your fucking tongue.”

All my brothers stare at me then. I’m not sure why. I’m being my normal prickish self.

“My name is Chloe Baros,” she answers Triston. “And I won’t take up any more of your time.” She steps up on tiptoe to glare at me over Triston’s shoulder. “It isn’t polite.”

Rush actually smiles as she takes my coffee and walks back to her table, the brightly patterned fitted dress doing an excellent job of highlighting just how amazing her ass is. And now that I’ve pointed it out, all my brothers are looking.

“If she wants me to leave her alone, she shouldn’t wear a dress like that,” I say to no one in particular.

“Killian,” Gris thumps my shoulder. “Tell me you’re not stalking a college coed.”

“I’m not stalking a college coed,” I say even as Chloe takes a sip of my coffee. It fills me with satisfaction, seeing her drink from the cup I gave her. Maybe she’s not wrong. This is getting kind of fucked up. I want to feed her?

“Fucking hell, Killian. Did you really follow her home?” This from Ryker.

“It was late and a bad neighborhood.” I don’t go so far as to lie and say I did it for her benefit, but I’m painting a picture and I hope they follow the breadcrumbs on their own.

“What did you take from her?” Rush asks, returning to his seat.

“Not a thing.” And that’s the truth. Mostly.

“Tell me what happened,” Triston says in a voice that has dropped to a whisper. “I need to know how bad this is.”

“No.”

“Tell me so I know how much money I need to float her so that she doesn’t sue you.”

“You and your lawsuits,” I mumble. “Nothing happened.” It’s none of Triston’s business.

“Where did you meet her?” Ryker asks.

“The piano bar,” Gris answers. “He’s been hanging out there nearly every night.”

I’m surprised he put that together, but he is a smart guy. I’ll give him that. “She waits tables there.”

“So Killian has finally caught feelings. I’ve been afraid of this day for a long time.” Ryker takes a sip of coffee to hide his frown, his carefree look from earlier gone. I’m not sure why everyone is making such a big deal out of this. It’s none of their business.

“I don’t have feelings,” I spit back. “I just want...” I look over at Chloe. I want to

cum on every inch of her skin.

“That’s good because whatever you did last night, she doesn’t want anything from you other than for you to be gone.”

Maybe.

Then again, I felt her orgasm. I barely touched her, and she exploded under my hand. She might want a bit more from me than she’s willing to admit.

I intend to find out.

CHAPTERFIVE

Chloe

I’m not surprised to find Killian in his dark corner table when I arrive at work.

Nor am I shocked when he requests me for his waitress. Part of me knows I should stay far away from Killian Smith.

Lord Killian Smith. I mean, seriously...he’s aristocracy?

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His brothers are all just as good looking as him, none of them give off the same air of unhinged like Killian does.

They are one of the major real estate developers in Vegas. I googled them between classes.

Which means, as long as I'm in this city, I'm not likely to escape Killian's attention. Not until he doesn't want to give it to me anymore. And unlike the Russian I hoped to avoid, Killian is proving difficult to shake.

The even more mind-blowing detail, is that when I saw him in the coffee shop, I didn't feel only annoyance or revulsion.

I was also...excited. In my defense, no one, besides me, myself, and I, has ever given me an orgasm before.

I've been afraid to let any guy close enough to even try. The fact that it turned out pleasantly is shocking.

But I know it's a terrible idea to allow Killian any closer. He is not the kind of crazy a girl can control. And then another part argues, there was a little control in my bedroom. He made me a promise and he kept his word.

I banish these thoughts, they're dangerous. Which is why I'm all business when I head over to his table. "Good evening. What can I get you?"

"Whisky. One an hour," he murmurs, his eyes sliding down my black oxford and

painted-on pants. “I like the dress better.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” I try for snark, but part of me is pleased. I like dressing in bold colors. Clothes are part of how I express myself. They are the palette that I share with the world, unlike my paintings, which are way too personal.

I’m an art history major because, while I love being a painter, I know I’m not ever going to make a living off it. That’s for people who are already rich. If I could become a curator or a gallery manager, I’d be ecstatic.

I leave Killian’s table and start for the bar when Callie approaches, giving me a sour look. “The Russians requested you.”

I look over to the table and try not to sigh as Alexander beckons me toward him. Crap. “Sorry,” I murmur to Callie. “I’m as unhappy about it as you are.”

“You can’t take all the good tippers,” she huffs, not asking why I might not be happy.

Sliding my tray under my arm, I approach the table. “Good evening, gentlemen, how may I help you?”

The one who always plays the piano gives me a long look, his eyes sliding down my uniform. “I’ve never introduced myself, I’m Dimitri Ivanov.”

I let out a slow breath, mentally cursing. “Pleasure.”

“Chloe, right?” Dimitri asks, his gaze running up and down me again.

“That’s right.”

“Alexander claims that you are the most professional of the staff.” He smiles and I

catch a gold-capped tooth among his molars.

“That’s very kind,” I reply, not liking where this is going.

Dimitri gives a light chuckle as though I’ve said something funny. “I wasn’t being kind. I’ve a meeting next week that I’m hosting in the back room. It requires discretion—” But he stops as three men appear in the door.

I recognize them instantly. Killian’s brothers.

The entire table of Russians stops looking at me and stares at them. Triston’s eyes meet mine, and then flick to the table I’m standing in front of. He looks at me for the briefest second, and then, his gaze shifts to Dimitri as he begins to walk over.

The air crackles.

“What can I get you gentlemen to drink?” I ask the Russians, sinking into my job to relieve the tension.

“Your best vodka and seven glasses,” Dimitri replies, his eyes on Triston.

“Of course.” I’m off, hustling to the bar. Did Triston come here to see them? To check up on his brother? To follow up with me?

Either way, I quickly load up the drinks, returning to the table, all the while feeling Killian watch all this play out from his hiding spot in the shadows. Why hasn’t he joined his brothers?

Setting the bottle on the table, I distribute the glasses and then fill each. I do the task as quickly as I dare without spilling.

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“This town gets smaller by the day,” Dimitri drawls as he looks at Triston, who has slid into a chair at the table.

I move to fill Triston’s glass, but he puts his hand out, covering the top. I’m about to move on, when Dimitri speaks. “Fill his glass, Chloe. I insist.”

“Of course,” I answer, even as Alexander shoots his entire glass back, slapping it on the tabletop for me to refill.

Triston removes his hand, and I fill it with a short pour, then move on to Rush’s and Ryker’s glasses. Leaning over the table, I fill Alexander’s again. But I’ve only just finished when he grabs my wrist. “I’ve been thinking about what you said yesterday,” he starts, his eyes stormy in a way that makes my breath catch.

“Leave it, Alex,” Dimitri commands.

Alexander’s mouth snaps shut and he releases my hand, but his glare assures me he isn’t happy.

The Smiths have been silent, but as I leave to bring Killian his drink, I hear Triston say, “My apologies if we’ve trodden on your preferred establishment. I’d only heard the music was good, but now I understand it’s likely because you’re playing.”

All the Russians laugh. I shake my head. I guess Triston got all the charm in the family.

Stopping at Killian’s table, he glares at me too. “Did that motherfucker just touch

you?”

My brows lift as I set down his whisky and his glass of water. “It’s fine, I’m used to it. But I am curious about why your family has made an appearance.”

He grunts. “Checking on me. Assessing you. They don’t trust me, but I think they’re learning all the ways they’ve been mistaken.” He waves at the Russian’s table. I don’t know what he means but I’m not asking.

“Do you need anything else?”

“Yeah. For you to suck my cock.”

I blink at him, my mouth hanging open. To my own shock, my answer isn’t one of disgust and I don’t feel the normal skitter of fear that always accompanies a sexual advance. “There is no way that thing will fit in my mouth.”

He laughs then, the husky chuckle vibrating through me and settling between my legs. “It’ll fit.”

“You have to know I’m not giving you a blowjob.”

“Is there a price?” He leans back in his chair, looking curious. Hungry.

“I’m not a prostitute.” I huff, honestly more offended by that question than his initial request.

“I could make you,” he cocks his head, gauging my reaction.

For a split second the fear hits me again. But I swallow it down. “But then you’d have to take that sensitivity training.” I turn to leave when he wraps a hand around my

thigh.

“It would be worth it.”

“Killian,” I hiss, pulling away. “Last night was a one-time thing, I...”

“It was not.”

“It was,” I turn, heading for my next table.

The night passes in a blur. The Smiths stay with the Russians, Killian remains hidden in his corner. I do my normal dance on my heels, the tips rolling in. At this rate, I’ll have a good head start on next month’s tuition bill.

After I take a quick bathroom break, I come out of the bathroom to find Killian waiting for me just outside the door.

“Go away,” I huff, trying to shrug past him.

“No,” he answers, trapping me against the wall in a cage of his arms.

“I’m not going to be your whore, Killian,” I say, trying to duck under his arm. That’s when he pushes his chest against mine, pinning me.

The coffee shop today, even the conversation about blowjobs had felt more...normal and less sinister.

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But trapped like this, I start to feel frightened again. “You’re scaring me.”

He eases back the slightest bit. “I’m never interested in women like this. I can’t leave it alone.”

I’d like to tell him that it’s not my problem, but Killian will make it my problem. “I’ve never even given a blowjob. I haven’t any idea how.” It’s the worst reason ever, but we’re on multiple rounds of this conversation.

“I’ll teach you.” His mouth is pressed to my ear.

But I shake my head. This is wrong. I don’t even want a regular guy to have power over me. I’m not giving it to someone like Killian. “No.”

His hand comes to my shoulder. “Yes.”

“No, Killian,” I start but he’s pushing me down, my knees buckling under his hand. Last night, I didn’t have to do anything. But this...getting down on my knees, this is my worst nightmare.

I grip his shirt, my ragged cry filling the space between us and I say the word I haven’t uttered in years. “Please, Killian. Please don’t do this.” And then my knees buckle and I end up exactly where I begged him not to put me. But the air won’t fill my lungs, I feel like I’m drowning.

I’m trying to breathe but I’m hyperventilating instead, tears filling my eyes.

“What the fuck?” he rumbles and reaches down, his hands in my armpits as he pulls me back up. “What is wrong with you?”

“So much,” I answer, as I close my eyes, allowing the wall and Killian’s hands to hold my weight. “Leave me be, Killian. I’m asking you to please leave me be.”

But that’s when a male laugh filters down the hall, followed by sharp words called in Russian.

I stiffen, wondering which one of them is coming, when Killian melts into the shadows.

Did he just leave me? Motherfu?—

I try to get my legs to work, but I’m still leaning against the wall when Alexander rounds the corner and stops when he sees me there.

He smiles, showing all his teeth, before he starts coming right for me.

CHAPTER SIX

Killian

I know that fucker wants to make a playground out of Chloe. Granted, that’s what I want too, but I won’t actually hurt her. I don’t think.

It’s an interesting realization, and I cock my head as I ponder. When did that happen? When did I decide that I wasn’t going to break her?

I didn’t like the sound of her cry, or the way she said please, like I was about to slit her throat. There is a particular way people who are about to die beg...like there is no

ego left, only a plea for humanity. I'm normally immune, but I don't like the sound when Chloe makes it.

My teeth grind together.

Chloe tries to push off the wall, but wilts against it again, when her heels won't quite support her.

Alexander strides toward her, as he licks at the corner of his mouth like he's about to devour her.

Fuck.

If I step out of the shadows, the Russians will know I'm here. That will be it. No more using this location to watch. To listen.

But if he touches Chloe...

I could kill him.

His death would put the Russians on notice that someone was hunting them. But if he dares to put his hands on her again...

He stops right in front of her, her chin notching up, her eyes wide with fear and glossy from her tears.

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“Look at what I’ve found.” Alexander rumbles and then he reaches up a hand and rubs his thumb over her cheek. She turns away, which only invites him to wrap his fingers around the back of her neck and he jerks her face toward his.

Both my hands clench as Chloe cries out.

Triston appears at the end of the hall. “Using the head too?” he says to Alexander who instantly lets Chloe go.

Triston and Gris are twins. They both inherited our mother’s classic looks and her charm, and I’ve seen them skate through some pretty gnarly situations.

I don’t pay a lot of attention to the business end of our business, my job is in the shadows, but I’m well aware that we’re moving through the millions and into the billions in assets because of the two of them.

Which is why I know that Triston is about to handle this situation. I relax back against the wall.

Alexander eases back away from Chloe, dropping his hand, but his face is full of his frustration. “I was on my way when I found our pretty waitress taking a break.”

Triston looks at Chloe, his gaze bland, as he smiles. “I can see why she’d need one. She’s been hustling all night. Is this place always so busy?”

Chloe nods, not speaking.

From the bar, Mozart filters from the piano, Dimitri clearly playing.

Triston has stopped, not moving on, though Alexander is openly glaring at my brother.

“I’m sorry to ask you to return to the main room when you’ve been working so hard all night, but I know my brother Rush was hoping for a highball. They’re his weakness.”

“O-of course,” Chloe clears her throat and then scoots past Alexander. She only wobbles on her heels once, and then she’s off down the hall, smoothing her ponytail before she rounds the corner.

My girl knows how to put a face back on. And while it’s impressive, it’s become clear that someone taught her to do so, after they made her suffer.

As much as I still want to dirty her up, I also want to know who the motherfucker is who has made her so afraid.

“You’re treading where you don’t belong,” Alexander spits at Triston.

“Careful,” Triston answers back smoothly. “You don’t want to pick a fight with me.”

“Because your brother married into the Kincaids?” Alexander sneers.

Triston only smiles. “Because we’re outpacing you in growth and profits, two to one.” Triston looks over his shoulder, and seeing Chloe gone, moves past Alexander, and heads to the bathroom door. His eyes meet mine before he pushes open the door. Unlike Alexander, Triston knew I was here all along.

Alexander follows as I shrink even deeper into the shadows. I listen to him spit a

string of curses in Russian as he makes his way into the bathroom after my brother.

I take the opportunity to return unnoticed to my table.

Chloe has dropped the check, even though I didn't ask for it.

I look over to find her cashing out at the bar. She slips on her leather jacket, stuffs her money in the hidden back pocket, and heads for the back door.

Dropping some bills on the table, I follow, not that it's hard. Dimitri commands the room and every eye is on him as he plays.

I stick to the edges where the light is low, already knowing the way to Chloe's apartment. Either she knows I've followed, or she's worried I might, because she looks over her shoulder several times.

When she gets to her door, she does one final check before she slips her key into the lock and disappears into the house, the deadbolt clicking behind her.

But I'm already moving around back. I jump to catch the raised ladder of the fire escape. Her window is locked, but opening a latch like hers is a job for amateurs and in a second, I'm sliding the window open and letting myself into her room. I lean against the wall in the corner.

I can hear her moving around, going into the bathroom, brushing her teeth. She finally comes into the room with her jacket over her arm. Pulling the money from the secret pocket, she pulls out her bed frame and stuffs the cash into a little hiding spot. Did she make that hole in the wall?

I study the paintings on the wall again, my breath catching. I love every one of them, the one of her face in pieces best of all. It's dark, gritty and when I first looked at it

last night, it made me feel...seen.

But my attention is captured by Chloe again as she unbuttons the oxford, shrugs it off, folds it, and sets it on top of the tiny bureau. Then it's her shoes and finally her pants.

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My cock is raging hard in my dress slacks as she reaches one hand back and unclasps the bra, letting the straps slip down her shoulders.

Fuck, her tits are absolutely fantastic. My initial assessment of them was all wrong. They're not big but full, and I want to stuff my mouth full. "You ought to warn a guy you're going to show him tits that good."

She screams, her arms coming up to cover her chest even as she stumbles back toward the door. "Killian!"

"Relax," I rumble, though I'm aware I scared the shit out of her. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"You shouldn't be here at all." She spins away, which only gives me an amazing view of her ass in a thong, as she snatches the shirt and pulls it to her chest, turning back around. "Seriously. This is so fucked up."

"Yeah. Maybe," I shrug, pulling off my T-shirt to show my tatted-up chest. The tattoos on my hands are meant to intimidate. They're part of the work. But the galaxy I've been having tattooed across my chest is for me alone.

She lets out a strangled cry. "What are you doing?"

But I only toss her the shirt. "Put it on if it makes you feel better."

She catches the shirt, holding it in her hand as she looks down at it. I pause too, waiting to see what she'll do. I'm actually holding my breath, I realize, as I wait to

see if she'll accept my small gift. Like the coffee, I want her to take it. Want to see her wrapped in my clothes.

Slowly, she unfurls the T-shirt, attempting to put it on while still holding her oxford to her chest.

Rumbling out my frustration, I close the distance between us. She jolts, her eyes going wide with fear, but I only stop in front of her, snatching the T-shirt back and opening it up to pull it over her head.

Grabbing the hem, I open up one side so she can stuff her arm into the sleeve, then I repeat with the other, until the shirt falls down around her body, hitting at her mid thighs.

"You're small," I grunt.

"You're big."

That makes me smile. "I'm sorry I scared you."

She shakes her head. "You should be. You can't just let yourself into my room."

"It was way too easy," I return, kicking off my shoes. "You need much better locks."

"Killian, what are you doing?" she's dropped the oxford, but now her arms are back around her middle.

"You think I'm leaving you alone after the way Alexander Ivanov threatened you tonight? You've got no security here. It's pathetic."

She blinks at me, her mouth opening and closing before she finally says, "You're

here to protect me?”

“Damn right I am. I’m sorry I left you to face him in the hall.” My gut twists. “It’s a business thing.”

“I don’t want to know.” She leans against the bureau, eyeing me warily.

“Smart.” I shuck off my pants and then lay on her tiny twin mattress, my feet hanging off the end. “You need a bigger bed.”

“I don’t.”

“Come here.”

“No.” She shakes her head, her arms still around her middle.

I put my hands under my head, flexing my abs. “Fine, but it’s going to be a long night with your back against the bureau.”

“Killian you have to go.” Her voice pleads with me, and I know we’re going to go round and round all night if I don’t concede something.

“It’s just sleeping. Nothing else.” I take out one of my hands from under my head to wave her forward. “I’ll be a good boy and I won’t even ask you to suck my cock again. Though, to be clear, you’re free to do so of your own volition.”

Her lips part as she stares at me. “You really are mental.”

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“That’s the consensus.” I wave at her again.

Very slowly she pushes off the bureau and tiptoes toward me, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. She stops at the edge of the bed, indecision in every line of her face.

I reach up my hand, circling her wrist. But this time my grip is light, soft, as I give her the smallest tug. She heeds my request, bringing a knee to the mattress before she slides in next to me, on her side, not touching me.

Fuck that. Wrapping an arm around her back, I pull her into my side. To my surprise, she comes, molding into my body. “I’m not much better.”

“What’s that now?” I ask as her cheek settles on my shoulder.

“How insane is it that the man who stalks me, manipulates me, breaks into my apartment, is the guy that I snuggle up to in bed? It’s so crazy that being next to you makes me feel safe.”

Ah. Now we’re getting somewhere. “You’re not wrong. I’m one of the monsters that go bump in the night.”

“Yeah.”

I don’t know why I do it. I’ve never kissed a woman when I wasn’t filling her mouth with my tongue, but I brush a light kiss over the top of Chloe’s head.

She must use a coconut-scented shampoo, because the fruity scent fills my nostrils.

“But maybe just now, you need a monster to fight back the other monsters.” I pull her even closer, my dick making a tent in my boxer briefs.

“Like if I decided to be a dragon rider and I had to worry that the dragon might burn me alive, or toss me off in the air, but if I tamed the dragon, then I’d be the safest girl of them all.”

“I don’t know what shit you’re talking about, but I’m not the type to be tamed.”

“It’s a book...” she murmurs but she sounds sleepy as she relaxes more of her weight onto me. “And you’re right. I’m not interested in taming any man. I just want them to leave me alone. Is that too much to ask?”

“Maybe you should get really fat,” I volunteer. Then narrow my eyes. “Nevermind. I bet you’d look amazing with extra curves. All that jiggle would be hot as fuck.”

My cock leaks a bit of cum.

“You’re too much,” she sighs and then goes quiet, her body giving a little involuntary jerk to let me know she’s fallen asleep.

Part of me wants to jerk off. My cock is beyond needy.

But instead, I wrap my other arm around her and close my eyes.

I’ve had sex, but I’ve never slept with a woman. Right before I drift off, I wonder what other firsts are coming my way.

CHAPTERSEVEN

Chloe

I'm in the deepest sleep of my life, when a strange noise pulls at the edges. By slow degrees, I wake, my body remaining warm and relaxed.

That's when the sounds finally register. "No. Stop."

What in the world?

A hand flexes on my back, a palm spreading out over my bare skin. Killian. The T-shirt has ridden up and he's taken full advantage, his palm against the bare skin of my back. I don't object. In fact, it feels really nice, the roughness of his palm moving against my spine.

"Doug. Wait. I said?—"

I lift my head, my brow knitted in confusion as Killian's dark eyes meet mine. "What's happening?"

"I think one of your roommates is having trouble with her date."

Planting a hand on Killian's chest, I push up, swiveling my head around to look for a weapon. It's probably Sarah. She's got awful taste in men and more than once, we've had to beat off some guy she's brought back to our place. I swear, she hooks up on the couch instead of her room for just that reason.

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Spotting my baseball bat I keep in the corner, I go to push my legs off the bed, but Killian's hand tightens on my hip holding me in place next to him. "You're not going out there." He glares at me, like there is no room for argument as he holds me against him.

"I'm not sitting here, listening to my roommate get raped," I fire back, glaring right back at him.

He cocks his head. "Is this another problem you need me to take care of?"

My mouth drops open because the asshole has trapped me again. This time, he's actually asking me if I want his services.

Instead of answering, I try to get off the bed again, but he flips me so that I land on top of him.

My knees naturally fall to either side of him, and the head of his cock pushes right against my clit.

It's like an explosion of sensation that rockets through me, and I arch my back, my neck craning so that my jugular is exposed to him, as I roll my hips to feel more of his cock against me.

"I'm going to take that as a yes," he growls, and turns us both over so my back lands on the mattress, his body above mine. Then he kisses me.

There is no tongue, it's just a firm press of his mouth to mine, but it feels amazing. I

grab his neck, my fingers digging into his hair as I kiss him back.

He lifts up a moment later, giving me a long stare before he pushes off the bed. And then, in nothing but the black boxers he's wearing, his cock barely contained and raging hard, he strides out of the room.

"Killian," I hiss, jumping up after him, just as Sarah makes a loud cry of protest.

Killian's shirt falls around my thighs as I scurry to catch up to his long strides.

But by the time I make it to the living room, he's already got the guy by the scruff of the neck, pulling him one-handed off Sarah and into the air.

"Hey Dougy," he rumbles. "Whatcha doin' out here?"

"What the fuck man?" Doug replies as Sarah scrambles off the couch and makes a dash to hide behind me. "Why don't you mind your business?"

One-armed, he gives the guy a shake, hard enough to rattle Doug's teeth. When he stops, he brings his face right into Doug's face. "You upset my girl. Which means, you upset me. So understand that makes you my business, mate." And then he gives Doug another good shake.

"Jesus," Doug cries. "I get it, man. I'm leaving. I'm sorry."

"Before you go, I want you to know that if I ever see you here again, I'll hogtie you, stuff your mouth with a rag that I duct tape in place, and sell you to the vagrants down the street to use as their personal fuck toy. I'm not sure if it's the pain or the stench that will make you vomit but with the gag, know you'll die choking on your own?—"

“Killian,” I cry, “you can’t talk like that. It’s terrible—” But I stop when the smell of urine hits my nose. “Did he just...”

“Fuck,” Killian drags the guy off the worn carpet and onto the even worse linoleum in the kitchen just as the piss reaches the bottom of his leg and starts to pool on the floor. Then he gives Doug another shake. “You’re cleaning that up, Dougy. How are you not house broken?”

“Killian,” I try again. “I’ll clean it up, just get him out of here.”

“No way, luv. You’re not touching this fucker’s piss. He made the mess, acting like the dog he is, he’ll either clean it up or I’ll rub his nose in it.”

I’m honestly not sure if I should be impressed or appalled.

“I’ll clean it,” Doug cries. “I’ll clean it, I swear. Don’t, don’t shake me again.”

“Sarah,” Killian says in this sing-song voice that makes Sarah jump and then snap to attention behind me.

“He knows my name,” Sarah sighs and I look back to see her making gooey eyes at Killian.

A surge of irritation courses down my spine. He was in my room. I’m wearing his shirt...

“Get the cleaning supplies,” Killian commands. Sarah dashes over to the cabinet under the sink, pulling out a spray bottle and some paper towels.

Killian finally lets Doug go, the guy not able to get his feet under him so he drops to his knees on the floor. But he barely cries out as he starts scrubbing like his life

depends on it. It probably does.

I look at Killian's hands and I know he's killed people. But I also think about his comment about having a monster of my very own. Is it crazy that there is some logic there?

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Doug finishes cleaning up his puddle of pee and then Killian grabs him by the neck again, hauling him toward the door.

He opens it, and sends Doug sailing out, down the steep set of stairs. He doesn't even watch to see how Doug lands, closing the door, and locking it behind him.

"A fuck toy? Seriously?" My arms are crossed and my brows up as Killian stalks toward me looking no less predatorial. But right this moment, I'm not scared. In fact, my nipples are two hard pebbles in his T-shirt.

He's so commanding, so strong. The problems I struggle to solve, he swipes away like they're just annoying flies.

He barely stops in front of me, wrapping an arm under my ass and lifting me up. "Speaking of fuck toys," he rumbles, and Sarah giggles.

"Go to bed, Sarah," Killian tosses over his shoulder. "Bring a guy like that back here again, and we're going to have a real problem."

That's when I see my other two roommates peeking their heads out of their rooms. Kennedy gives me a little wave, her eyes dragging down Killian's massive body.

She's not wrong. He's super impressive with his powerful thighs and his ridiculously broad shoulders.

The ink on his chest is a work of art and sometime, I'd actually like to study it. My hands are on his shoulders, but as he closes my bedroom door behind us, I slide my

fingers up his neck and into his hair.

It might be the softest thing about him, and I grab hold of it with both hands, my cheek resting against his forehead. “Thank you.”

He grunts in response. “This is an exchange, remember?”

“You’re going to ask for that blowjob, aren’t you?”

“Will you cry if you suck my cock?” he asks in return, stopping in the middle of the room.

I lift up my face to look in his eyes. “No. Just don’t make me go down on my knees, okay?”

“Tell me why that bothers you.”

I shake my head. “Don’t worry about it. Just take your payment.”

“I want you to tell me first. Who was he and what did he do?” Killian’s words hit too close, and I grimace as I look away.

“Only if you tell me why you are the way you are.”

“I was just born this way.” But I feel him stiffen, I know that he’s not being honest. I turn to look at him again, nipping at my lip. We could keep hiding from each other or we could get to the part I’ve been telling myself I don’t want even though I know that I do.

“Killian?”

“Yeah?”

“I know that this is a tit-for-tat thing, you help me, I help you, and now I owe you for the Doug thing. But is there any chance that you’d touch me again?” I feel the heat in my cheeks, my embarrassment on display, but I ask anyway, because it’s dark and because the feel of his cock against my clit was so good...

He makes this rumble deep in his chest that reverberates through me too and then he lays me down on the bed.

Grabbing the hem of his T-shirt, with a quick jerk, he rips it wide open. “Killian!” Equal parts excitement and fear ripple through me.

“It’s my shirt,” he grins. “I’ll rip it if I want.”

I let out a nervous giggle even as he hooks my thong with both hands and gently slides the underwear down my thighs, over my knees, past my ankles and off my feet.

“Even your toes are sexy,” he rumbles, and he grabs one of my feet, bringing it to his mouth where he plants a kiss on the arch.

I gasp, because it tickles but then he sucks my big toe between his lips before he slides his tongue in the valley between two of them.

I push up on my elbows, my hair tumbling down my back as I look at my foot in his massive hand.

He’s right. I do look small compared to him.

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He loosens his grip on my foot, sliding his hand along the muscle of my calf and then hooking my knee to bend and open my leg.

My breath is coming out in in shorter and shorter bursts, my blood rushing in my ears.

He reaches for my other knee, bending that one too, opening me fully so that I'm spread out before him.

He stares at my most intimate parts, and I fight the urge to blush or to hide.

Reaching out, he brushes his knuckles over my mound. "This belongs to me," he rumbles. "No one else."

"I already told you," I answer, looking away then. "I don't date. I've never done any of this before."

"Good," he grunts as he lowers himself on the bed to settle his face between my thighs. Then he nips lightly at my thigh.

My body jumps, partially out of surprise, but also anticipation as he nibbles closer to where I ache. The closer he moves, the sharper the ache becomes. I'm getting so wet, I can smell my own excitement.

Finally, he takes a long lick, sliding his tongue along the entire length of my seam.

My head falls back as a needy, keening moan escapes my lips.

His answer is to swirl his tongue right on my clit. “Oh God, that feels so good.” A flood of heat and wetness is surely puddling on my bed as Killian takes a long swirling lick at my clit.

“Your pussy is fucking delicious,” he rumbles into my skin. “I could eat you all night.”

My answer is to moan louder while I bury my fingers in his hair, encouraging him to get even closer.

My knees have fallen further apart, my body completely open to him as I whimper out my need.

And then I say the word I hate, only right in this moment I don’t hate it at all. “Please, Killian. Please make me cum.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Killian

It’s the fucking please that gets me. She begged me in the same way earlier, when she asked me to not put her on her knees.

I hated the way she sounded then, broken and battered, like I’d wrung out the last of her dignity.

But this please... It sets me on fire. I lap at her little clit, sliding a finger into her pussy and holy fucking shit, she’s so tight around me, so soft and silky, my cock jumps and twitches.

She lets out a breathy moan before she absolutely clamps down on my finger. As she

cums, she digs her fingers into my scalp, the convulsions curling her body in the sexiest way.

I take my free hand and grab my cock through my underwear to keep from cumming, like a fresh-faced schoolboy, in my boxers.

She's turning me into a puppy dog.

Her spasms slow, her body wilting into the bed, my tattered T-shirt still hanging around her arms.

She brushes her hair back from her face, her hair spread out on the bed like a halo. Jesus, she looks so beautiful all languid and satisfied.

I lift up to stare, keeping my finger inside her. "That was beautiful, luv."

She shakes her head, a smile playing on her lips. "I'm not sure it's what you intended."

"Course it is. I want to touch you, be touched by you. I'll take any opportunity I can to hear you make those noises again."

She giggles, just a small little sound. And I'd like to just watch her for a while longer, but my cock is straining against the band of my underwear, pushing up above the waistband. I rise up on my knees, pulling the fabric down on my hips as I take my cock in my hand and give it a few good pumps. I'm still between her legs, and the view of her pussy is even better than the one last night of her ass.

"I could look at you all the time," I grunt, giving another tug.

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But she slides away, moving further up the bed. I catch her foot, my brow slashing down but she only smiles as she lets my shirt fall down her arms. Then she playfully tugs her foot from my grasp, flipping around so that her belly is on the bed, her ass in my view again, her mouth lined up with my cock.

“Yes,” I growl out as I angle my monster toward her lips.

She’s tentative, licking at the tip, taking a few small suckles but I let her play, my breath growing ragged from all the teasing.

When her mouth finally opens and she takes in the mushroom head, filling her mouth with just the head, I feel the tingle as my cum starts to move up my shaft. “That’s it, luv, it won’t take much, I’ve been hard since last night...fuck...” I rumble out as she slides even more of me into her mouth and I hit the back of her throat.

I’m still pumping at my shaft with one hand, but the other I settle into her mass of honey hair, twisting it all up in my fist.

She feels so good I start spitting and cursing as she slides back off me and then takes me back in.

My whole body starts to shake, my thighs most of all. No orgasm has ever built like this, I can feel difference as she sinks down deep on me, choking a bit in her effort to take me in.

“Chloe,” I groan. “Yeah, baby, just like that. Fuck.”

Her hand comes to my hip, her delicate fingers small and so fragile looking as she holds onto me. I swear, I'm going to have her hand tattooed right there as she draws me closer.

I tighten my grip on her hair, but she pops off, looking at me with big eyes. "Killian?"

"Yeah?" I ache to have her back on my cock.

She looks at me, her eyes full of apology, "Could you not hold my hair like that?"

I blink down at her, my jaw going hard. "Are you going to tell me why?"

She shakes her head, her hair cascading about her shoulders as I let it go. "No. I don't want to ruin this, I just..." And then, with my hand on her neck, instead of in her hair, she dives back on my cock.

My eyes squeeze shut. I want cum so bad but also... I pull back, the sound of her lips leaving my cock making a little popping noise.

She looks up at me with a wince. "I ruined it anyway."

"You didn't ruin anything," I look down at her, every muscle taut. "Tell me why you don't like when I hold your hair and why it scared you to kneel."

She nips at her lip, drawing in several breaths before she finally answers. "My stepfather..."

"Jesus fucking Christ," I spit. If he sexually assaulted her, I swear I will make him hurt in ways he never even dreamed were possible. The way I threatened Dougy.... Child's play compared to what I'm going to do to him.

She winces. Does she misunderstand? I run a gentle hand over her cheek, and this time, I cradle the back of her head, as I let her hair slip through my fingers. “Have you told anyone about him?”

She shakes her head.

“It will make you feel better to tell me.”

She draws in a shaky breath. “I’m not sure it will.”

“Why not?”

She looks at the painting, the one where her face is in pieces. “Because then you’ll understand that I’m really broken.”

I’m sliding down on the mattress, flat on my back. “Luv, there is no way you’re more fucked up than me. Trust me. You can share with me, and I’ll understand. Maybe better than anyone.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” It’s not lost on me that this is the second time she’s made me promise something. Does my girl struggle to trust?

She nods, drawing in a deep breath as she stares at the painting. “He was my mom’s third husband. I think she married him because he was a cop, and her second husband had made these death threats...”

I stare at her, because she was right about one thing. I’m starting to understand. I think I’m fucked up, but I mostly grew up in a stable house. My father fucking hated my guts, but that’s not important right now.

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“Right. Three husbands. Second one threatened your life, third one was supposed to be the protector.”

Her face is drawn in tight painful lines. “I was like fourteen and I was so angry at my mom. I’m sure I sucked. But...” She looks at the painting again.

“Tell me.”

“He was such a hard ass. Like sadistic. It started with his belt. But when a teacher noticed marks on my legs...”

I can feel my anger rising as I picture an even smaller version of little Chloe being beaten with a belt. My hands clench into tight balls.

“He changed tactics and after that, he stopped leaving marks. Instead, he’d make me kneel for hours until I begged him to let me up and apologized for whatever shit I’d done, or what he said I’d done. The more resistant I got to apologizing, though, the worse it got. He’d take my bed, starve me.” I hear the sob, her body shaking with the sound. I pull her down on my chest and she burrows into me.

“Finally, when I was sixteen, I’d had enough. I refused to apologize, refused to beg. It went on for hours.... It was stupid to think I’d break him.” A small broken cry falls from her lips. “That’s when he got a bucket of water and put it in front of me where I kneeled.”

I know what she’s going to say and my chest grows so tight I can barely breathe. “Tell me that motherfucker did not—” I’m holding her so tightly, her body crushed to

mine, and I try to unlock my muscles so that I don't hurt her.

But she's not listening, not even paying attention to my grip, as the words just keep coming, falling from her lips. "He held my hair tight in his fist and he pushed my head into the water, and I couldn't breathe." She starts hyperventilating then, her fingers digging into the muscles of my chest.

"Hey," I whisper. "You're with a monster, remember? No one is going to hurt you here." I, however, am going to kill that motherfucker. Slowly. And with great pleasure.

She lifts her head then, her eyes full of tears. "You'd protect me?"

"You're fucking right I would." The words are out before I really think about them, but they settle over me like a warm blanket. I mean them.

The words affect her too. Because she pushes off my chest and kneels next to me, bringing all her hair over one shoulder.

Then she bends over until she can kiss the head of my cock again.

"Hey," I say, with a shake of my head. "I know what I said earlier, but we don't have to do this now. You can return the favor another time." Because there is going to be another time. And a time after that.

I've already decided that this is too good to just be a random hookup.

"I want to," is all she replies before she opens her lips and takes an amazing amount of me into her mouth.

It feels so good, my hand comes to her neck again. "I mean it, Chloe. We can finish

this tomorrow.”

But she’s already taking more of me into her mouth. She gags but doesn’t let up. Finally, I pull her up, but she only plunges back down, one of her hands spread on my stomach, the other on my thigh.

She looks so perfect, feels so good, I erupt as I let out a guttural cry, my hips lifting off the bed as the cum erupts from my cock, filling her mouth.

She drinks me down, her fingers flexing on my skin, and when I’m done cumming, she brings her forehead to my lower belly. “You were right.”

“What was I right about?”

“It does feel better to have told you.”

Those words break something in my chest and I’m hauling her up my body, curling myself around her. “You want to tell me his name?”

“Why?” she lets me spoon her, pushing her bare ass right against my cock, and the damn thing stirs again. Apparently, he’s ready to go for round two. I ignore the need, wrapping my arms tight around her.

“Because I’m going to turn him into a meat puppet.”

She goes rigid in my arms and then looks back at me, her mouth open. “You want to make my stepfather a meat puppet? What does that even...never mind...” But she kisses me then. It’s not the hard kiss I gave her. Its soft and sweet, made even better because I can smell my cum on her breath.

No woman has ever kissed me like that. They’ve kissed me like they want me. But

they've never kissed me like I'm something that should be cherished.

I cup her cheek kissing her back. Then I settle her back into the curve of my body.
“Get some sleep.”

“Okay,” she yawns. “My alarm is set for six.”

“What the fuck for?”

“I’ve got studio time.”

“Studio time?”

“Yeah. I don’t have a big enough space to paint so I sign up for spots at the school’s studio. But I’m not a visual arts major so I get last pick of the available times. I can’t do late nights because of the bar, so I take the early morning stuff.”

So that’s where she paints. I wish I could watch her, but even I get that it would be creepy.

And then I realize, if I’m not careful, I’m going to turn into Gris. All gushy over a woman. Which is a problem because I’m my family’s enforcer. The man who does all the nasty shit.

Turning her stepfather into a meat puppet? Easy. Snuggling on Sunday mornings? That’s not going to be me. I’m the thing that goes bump in the night.

Then again, I probably shouldn’t worry. She only blew me because I bartered for it. As long as we keep this a tit-for-tat kind of affair, there shouldn’t be any trouble at all.

Then again, trouble is my middle name.

CHAPTERNINE

Killian

Her alarm goes off at a ridiculously early hour considering how late we were up and how interrupted the night's sleep was.

She crawls over me to turn off the beeping and then remains on my chest, curled on top of me.

I wrap my arms around her, closing my eyes again. "Getting up is a shitty idea," I murmur into her hair, which is cascading over my shoulder onto the pillow.

"I told you, it's the only chance I have to paint."

"New idea." I slide a hand down her back, settling it just above her ass. "We go get your stuff at the last possible moment you can enter the studio and then you paint as long as you want at my place." I'd like to watch her work.

I know it's a very flawed plan. I went to bed claiming this was just going to be an exchange of sexual favors, but Chloe is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, and I just want to look at her for a while.

I can picture her barefoot and in a messy bun with paint splattered all over the epoxy cement floors in my loft.

"I can't do that," she murmurs into my chest and then starts to push herself up and off me.

I tighten my arms. "Why not?"

"Because," she sighs. "You're my stalker. I can't go hanging out at your place. That's just wrong."

I don't release her. "It would make the stalking much easier if you did."

She gives a sleepy chuckle but settles back on my chest. "We both know I haven't been a challenge at all. In terms of the stalking..."

"No. But you've been the most fun."

She lifts her head then, her eyes narrowed into slits. "Do you stalk a lot of women?"

I hadn't been expecting jealousy, and I've got to be honest, I fucking love it. I shift her so that her stomach is flat on mine, her legs falling to either side of my hips.

She's warm and so soft. Reaching for her cheek, I don't tell her this week is full of firsts for me too. Instead, I kiss her with the lazy gentleness six in the morning deserves. "No. I don't. And also, just so you know, you're the only woman I've ever invited to my place."

"Oh," her eyes go wide as her cheeks flush with this bronzing pink that's gorgeous. "Really?"

"So I'll be crushed if you don't accept."

"I have a hard time believing that anything could crush you." But she's settling back on my chest, getting comfy. "My studio time ends at nine, I have to pick up supplies before then or someone else will be in the room."

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“Done,” I close my eyes, tracing her hips with my hands. She’s still naked and it’s a very pleasant way to wake up, even if I have only gotten a few hours of sleep.

I feel her fall back to sleep right on my chest, her hands resting on my biceps. I look down. I love the way her hands look on any part of my body. I’m covered in tattoos and muscles and she’s this complete contrast to me.

With my other hand, I gather up her hair, but I don’t pull, I gently lay it over my chest, then run my hand down the silky length. Then I pull the covers up over her, tucking her in so she’s warm and comfortable.

I can’t remember another time I felt this...still.

No dark emotions pulsing through me, just contentment. I close my eyes, relaxing back into the bed.

That’s when a knock sounds on the door.

“Chloe?” a female calls out.

I open my eyes again, rumbling a protest. Her hands flutter down my arms in this soothing stroke. “Yeah, Daff?”

“Can I borrow your curling iron?”

“Do any of you people sleep?” I ask even as the door swings open.

A girl appears in the doorway, her eyes going wide. “Oh sorry, I didn’t realize you still had company.”

“The curling iron is on the bureau,” Chloe says, not opening her eyes.

Daff’s eyes are all over us as I pull the covers tighter around Chloe. “How long have the two of you been seeing each other?”

“Not long,” Chloe answers in that sleepy voice.

“I’m just surprised,” Daff says, curling iron in hand. “You never date and?—”

“Not now, Daff,” I rumble out with a healthy glare. Daff’s eyes get really big and then she scrambles out of the room. The second the door closes, I say, loud enough for Daff to hear. “You’ve got too many roommates.”

“Trust me, I know,” Chloe answers, rubbing her nose against my pec. “But this is honestly the best I could afford. My last place, I didn’t even have my own room.”

Chloe falls back to sleep, but I’m wide awake now. I just watch her sleep, wondering when I became the guy who enjoys listening to her breathe.

She wakes an hour later, and we take a quick shower, where I touch as much of her as possible, and then we’re back in her room to get dressed.

Which is when I realize I ripped my shirt in half last night. With a laugh, she goes out to the kitchen and returns with two chip clips. Turning the shirt backwards, she clips it on my body. I look into the mirror, the garment even more fitted for being clipped and I wink at her in the reflection. “I look good, right?”

“You are too much,” she rolls her eyes as we head off to the studio.

Chloe's painting stuff fits into a small cubby, a roll of brushes and seven or eight tubes of oil paint. She does grab an easel, which I take from her, and a canvas that's about a three-foot square that she can just tuck under her arm.

"You're not already working on something?" I ask her, thinking of the paintings I saw in her room.

She shrugs. "I've got a new idea."

With all the stuff under our arms, I open my Uber app and request a car. Within fifteen minutes, we reach my loft.

I'm not really much for furniture so the space is pretty open, a few stools at the island, a big couch, a big bed. The place is west-facing with floor-to-ceiling windows and a wide-open view of the Las Vegas skyline.

I'm not really a fan of Vegas, I liked London better. But Vegas is good for a guy like me. So much shit goes down here and it's so transient with tourists coming in and out, it's an easy city to hide any shit.

Chloe sets up the easel near the windows, placing the canvas on the stand, and then squirts some paint onto a palette.

Her eyes lift to mine as I lounge back on the couch. "Mind taking off your shirt?"

My brows lift. I never mind taking off my clothes and so I shrug off the T-shirt, the chip clips flying as I do.

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Then I settle back, my arms spread wide on the back of the couch. “Mind telling me why?”

She slips off her little sneakers and pulls off her socks. Today she’s wearing a pair of Kelly green leggings with a multicolored tank top, her hair piled on top of her head in this sexy messy bun that makes me want to do all kinds of dirty things.

She’s got this playful smile on her lips as she pads across the concrete floor, coming toward me. Then she leans over, her fingers tracing the edges of the massive tattoo on my chest. “Is it the Milky Way?”

“Yeah,” I answer. I don’t tell her that each star I add to the outer edges represents a life I’ve taken. I don’t want to touch that darkness today, it’s too happy being here with her.

But she seems to zero in on them, tracing several of them with her finger. “What does it mean?”

I shrug. “I just like it.”

She cocks her head, sliding her hand over her skin. “No bigger meaning?”

A muscle in my cheek twitches. “I think the stars are like people. Billions of them...” I don’t tell her about how I’m not a star, I’m a black hole, or how my own family?—

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop,” she whispers, “I can see your light dimming, so I won’t ask again.”

I look at her then, confusion drawing my brows together. “What do you mean, my light dimming?”

“The light in your eyes is dying again,” she answers, removing her hand from my skin. But then she leans over and softly kisses my forehead before she turns back and walks back to her canvas, my gaze on her ass as she goes. I relax again as she picks up the palette, staring at the blank canvas,

Then, dipping her paint brush in multiple colors, she starts painting. She’s facing me so I can’t see what she paints, but just watching her body move, the way she concentrates, furrows her brow, starts again, it’s mesmerizing.

I have no idea how long I’ve just been sitting, watching her work, I’ve lost all sense of time when my doorbell buzzes.

It jars me out of the trance I’ve been in, and for a second I just glare at the offending door before I push off the couch, and go to answer it.

Triston stands on the other side. “What the fuck?” I ask as I open the door.

He glares back. “What the fuck? You’re asking me that? You haven’t answered your phone in hours. You weren’t home last night.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I came to talk to you,” he says as he pushes through the door. “You can’t go that long without answering, I thought you were—Chloe.”

He turns to me, his brows rising up his forehead.

Chloe’s got a paint brush sticking out of her messy bun, her eyes focused on the

canvas, as she bends over in her bare feet and tank top. “Hey, Triston. Nice to see you again.”

He looks between me and her, noting my shirtless chest and her bare feet. “I’m just curious, yesterday you intimated that my brother was—erm—following you?”

“Yeah. This is a lot less work for both of us,” she answers without taking her eyes from her work.

But her words make me laugh as Triston’s hands come up to either side of his chest, palms up as his mouth falls open.

“She needs good light and space to work, and I’ve got both,” I supply. I was enjoying the quiet of watching her work, so I cross my arms. “You’ve confirmed I’m alive. Is there anything else, Tris?”

He nods in the affirmative and starts walking toward my office space. That’s the thing about having a brother who is the boss. He’s fucking bossy everywhere. I follow as Chloe’s eyes flick to mine, a question in them, but I only wink.

Once we’re in my office space, which only has one chair, Triston closes the door. I slide into the only seat, asserting my dominance in my own space. Nonplussed, he sits on my desk. “What’s going on with you and Chloe?”

“None of your business,” I answer. “Why don’t you get to the point.”

“That is my point. You don’t date. As far as I’m aware, you don’t even hook up with women. At least you haven’t for a long time.”

I shrug, debating telling my brother to fuck off. “Like I said, she’s got a nice ass.”

“She does, sure, but lots of girls with nice asses have tried to get you in bed. You usually just scare them off.”

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“She’s tough to scare off and she isn’t trying to get me in bed. If anything...”

“Hard to get,” Triston nods. “I get that.”

No. He doesn’t. He has no idea what it feels like to know you are born of darkness. And what I’m starting to understand, is that Chloe knows about the dark. “Look, it’s not serious. I’m not the serious type.”

Triston looks me up and down, his mouth turning down. “Maybe.”

“I’m a fucking assassin, Triston. This...” I point at myself, “is not long-term material.”

“Does she know you’re an assassin?” Triston asks, leaning forward.

And that’s when I understand. I know loads of secrets that my family would be worried I’d divulge. My hands are the dirty ones, but the filth covers us all. “Of course not.”

He nods. “Good. Now tell me what’s going on with the Russians. Or maybe tell me why you haven’t told me you’ve been spying on the Russians.”

“I was going to tell you when you needed to know. I’m just gathering information for now. Learning where they live, where they do drops, have meetings. I know they’re tentative partners with our new in-laws, the Kincaids. But that partnership is tenuous at best. Information will help us no matter how events play out.”

Triston scrubs at his jaw. “Jesus, Killian, that’s impressive even for you. No one is as good at this as you,” he mutters.

I appreciate the compliment. Usually, I think my brothers barely tolerate me. But even the compliment lands flat. I’m different. We all know it. “I was born into it.”

“We were all born the same,” he returns, giving me an odd look.

I don’t correct him, but we weren’t. Pushing up from my seat, I say, “The Russians are planning some move. There have been a lot of meetings, I’ve seen a few of those Italian fucks in and out of the piano bar. You might want to use your connections to see if anything legal is happening, while I keep exploring the illegal side of their relationship.”

Triston jerks his chin. “You got it. Good job.” He stands, crossing to the door. But he stops. “That Alexander is circling Chloe pretty tightly. If you plan on keeping her around for a while, you might want to remove her from the bar to keep things cordial with the Bratva fucks.”

My brother isn’t wrong, but that is going to be tricky. Still, I’ve got a few ideas. “You know that club the Kincaids own, you think they’d hire Chloe?”

“Temptation?” he asks.

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Leo would be lucky to have Chloe on staff, I’ve seen her at work, she’s a fantastic waitress, and the tips there would be even better than where she works now. I’ll talk to Leo today.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll reach out tonight with anything I learn about the Russians.”

We both head out of the office, stopping to watch Chloe, who is so focused, she doesn’t even notice that we’ve come back into the open kitchen and living space.

Triston is assessing Chloe as she nips at her lip, her brush working over the canvas. “Be careful,” Triston eyes her warily. “She was dangerous when she was accusing you of following her, but with her in your life like this, she has the power to undo us all.”

“I know my business.” I glare at him. I might be crazy. But I’m not stupid. Then again, I’m starting to wonder what I’d trade to keep her in my life.

CHAPTERTEN

Chloe

This painting is the most fun I’ve had in a really long time. I mean, besides being in bed with Killian.

Throughout the day, he brings me food, so I barely need to stop.

I look back at my work, smiling.

The galaxy, done in shades of blue and purple sparkles in the late afternoon sun, I did mostly background work today, layer upon layer of paint, but I’ve begun to add the stars that make up the bright center.

I finally have to put the painting down to get ready for work. Killian insists on ordering me an Uber to take me home.

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I know that Killian and I aren't dating. This time yesterday, I was considering involving the police.

But him taking care of me all day, feeding me, watching me paint, I think that might be what relationships are actually like. But then again, maybe not. How would I know?

My mom was no help. Her idea of a good man was one who gave her an Amex card that had no limit.

Killian hasn't had a shirt on all day so when he pulls me against his chest to kiss me goodbye, my hands land on his bare pecs. "I'll see you later," he murmurs against my lips, and then he places a kiss on my neck at the base of my throat.

"You coming to the bar tonight?" I ask, nipping at my lip. I don't know how to tell him that I've started enjoying his presence there.

"I'm not sure. I might have to meet with Triston," his hands have skated down to my ass. "Want to come over after you're out of work and see my bed?"

"Why would I need to see your bed?"

"It's like my cock, it's really big," he rumbles into my skin.

I shake my head, trying to decide if this is a good or bad idea. One day of hanging out, a couple of orgasms and I'm catching feelings.

“You could get up in the morning and paint.” He nips at my collarbone, kissing a path to my shoulder.

“Now I see why you offered your place for my painting. It’s another bargain.”

“You caught me,” he rumbles, squeezing my ass cheeks. “I’ll meet you at the piano bar at two to walk you home.”

“I thought you had to meet Triston?”

“We’ll be done by then no matter what. I don’t like you walking alone, anyway.”

I shake my head because I’ve been walking on my own for years. But his phone chimes that my Uber is here, so I head down the elevator and out to the car. It’s a quick ride back to my place, leaving me tons of time to get ready for work.

Daffodil is there, and she gives me a long look when I come out dressed in my uniform. “So...” she wags her eyebrows, “what’s the deal with the new man?”

Daffodil is a gorgeous redhead, and my favorite of my roommates because she never causes trouble, and she always pays her share of the rent on time. I shrug. “I don’t know. I think we’re just kind of hanging out.”

“He looked like he made a great pillow,” she starts, biting back a smile. “And considering the noises you made in the middle of the night, he does some other things even better than that.”

I blush to my roots, realizing everyone probably heard me last night. Small place...thin walls. “Right.”

“And he was really handy with the Sarah situation. Knows how to handle himself.”

I could tell her he's rich too, from the best kind of family.

"He's all that. He's also just..." I sigh.

"A little scary when he threatens to turn a guy into a sex toy for the homeless?"

If she only knew just how scary. "Yeah. He lacks a filter, and he's definitely got a hard streak."

He is rawer than any person I've ever met. I thought it was a problem at first, but I'm starting to wonder if it actually makes me more comfortable. I never have to wonder who the real Killian is. He is always just himself.

Waving goodbye to Daff, I leave for work. I cut last night short, so I really need to make up the tips tonight.

But I've no more than entered when I see Alexander sitting at the Russians' usual table with a man I remember seeing with them a few times, but I don't know his name.

He gives me this leer that immediately sets my teeth on edge as I tie on my apron.

I'm relieved to discover that Callie has already taken their table and I don't need to serve them.

Grabbing my tray, the hostess calls out to me. "Table eight."

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With a nod, my night begins.

It's a fine crowd tonight, nobody grabs my ass, and tips are decent. I'd hoped for better, but this will at least give me food money when I pay my tuition on Monday.

My shift flies by, and a few hours into the night, I get my first chance to take a breath. I lean against the dark corner of the bar, Mike busy filling orders for the waitresses, while serving a group at the bar.

Leaning my head back against the wall for a second, my mind goes to my painting and to Killian.

I started with the colors of the sky, painting him in blues and purples but I'm going to add his body around the stars. It's not just a painting of the man with his tattoo. For me, somehow, Killian feels like he could be as big as the universe.

A smile curves my lips.

"What are you smiling about, Printsessa?" My eyes fly open to find Alexander standing just a few feet away, the other guy next to him.

I push off the wall but I'm too late and they close in. I try to catch Mike's eye, but his back is to me as he serves drinks.

Alexander pushes me back against the wall. "You're not running off this time." He clamps his hand around my upper arm, coming between me and the bar so my view is blocked. "And there is no Smith to save you."

“This is the one that Triston’s interested in?” The other guy asks.

“Chloe, meet Preston Wingate. He was engaged to Arabella Kincaid before Gris Smith got in the way. Preston is not a fan of the Smiths.”

I know I’m in trouble as Alexander starts pushing me toward the bathroom hallway. The two of them mostly block me from the crowd and I’m trying to figure out how to break away. “Mike,” I call out, but he doesn’t turn. “Mi?—.”

Preston’s hand comes to my mouth, cutting off my call. They’re pulling me into the hall, and I know this is bad. I have no idea what they’ll do if they get me alone.

With a quick jerk Alexander’s not expecting, or maybe he’s too drunk to correct for, I pull my arm from his grasp.

Then I spin, making a run for the bar.

That’s when Preston grabs my ponytail and yanks. He sends me falling back even as his hand comes down hard against my cheek. I cry out as I fall to the ground, my back smacking into the wooden floor. “Consider that a warning and a favor,” Preston spits. “Stay away from the Smiths or you will pay.”

That’s when Mike appears. “What the fuck?”

“She fell man,” Alexander says with a shrug. “It’s those heels, I think.” Then both of them saunter back toward their table like they’ve done nothing wrong.

It feels like my cheek bone exploded, as Mike crouches down next me. “Did that guy just hit you?” he asks, looking from me to their retreating backs.

“It’s all right,” I say, slowly lowering my hand from my face.

“It’s not all right. We should call the cops?—”

“Don’t,” I shake my head. “I can’t afford to cause trouble.”

He’s looking at me like I’m crazy. “You should see your face.”

I curl tighter into myself. “How bad?”

“Bad. You gotta put some ice on that.”

He pulls me up and helps me behind the bar, dropping the scooper into the ice bin, he dumps a pile of ice into a towel and hands it to me.

I set it on my face, and wince at the pain. I turn toward the mirror behind the bar and gape at the sight that greets me. My cheek is already red and swollen.

My boss hustles behind the bar. “What are you doing—holy shit. What happened?”

“I fell,” I say, because this is not something I want to deal with publicly or privately, for that matter. I’m not sure what I’m going to do, but I can’t keep working here if Alexander is going to come after me every night.

He shakes his head. “I’m going to have to send you home, you can’t be out on the floor like that.”

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I could cry, not from the pain, but because all the good my one night of good tips did for my budget is being eaten back up.

And for once, I'm not even sure I want to walk home. What if Alexander and Preston follow?

I grab my phone from my jacket pocket and hit the Uber app. I can't afford the car, but I just don't want to be out alone tonight. Gathering up my stuff, I turn to my manager. "Can I wait in your office? I don't want to be seen."

"Good idea," he nods. "Any maybe you should take a few nights off until the swelling goes down? Looking like that will not be good for business."

Inwardly I groan. I can't take more nights off. But I don't think I really have a choice. Holding back tears, I head to the back.

Luckily, my car arrives quickly, and I go out the back door, through the alley. It's how the employees mostly enter and exit the bar. But even if we didn't, I don't want to pass through the front again.

I pick up my phone considering calling Killian. But then I drop it back in my pocket. I know he's busy tonight. Besides, he's not my boyfriend and this is not his problem.

I keep the ice on my face and I move through the alley and climb into the backseat of the car. What started off as an amazing day, has turned into a nightmare of a night.

Slumping down into the seat, I close my eyes.

I've found myself in the middle of some disagreement between the Smiths and the Russians, and I've no idea how to get myself out.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Killian

Triston talks forever about permits and purchase deals, but at the end of the call, I think I understand.

The Russians are double-crossing the Kincaids and making deals with the Italians to buy more casinos. Something they agreed not to do in exchange for access to the Kincaids' underground Las Vegas tunnel. They're trying to work both sides, which is why they've been so secretive.

Mason Kincaid, the head of his family, is not a man anyone should fuck with. I'm a badass motherfucker, and I would not take on Mason.

Dimitri can think he's better than the Kincaids, tougher, meaner, but Mason climbed his way to the top from nothing. And he's legit the smartest man I know. No one is outthinking him.

But that is the Russians' problem. All we can do is give Mason the information and let him do his worst. Triston has decided we're going all in with the Kincaids. Part of me is relieved to not have to deal with the Russians myself. I'm going soft...

Then again, I've gathered everything Mason will need to take them down. I still have my uses.

Putting on a fresh T-shirt and strapping on a pair of worn leather work boots, I head out, planning to meet Chloe at the piano bar to escort her back to my place. It's not

the usual business attire I'd wear, but let them try to keep me out.

The bar is already quiet when I get there a little after midnight as I make my way to my usual table.

A bubbly brunette rushes over to take my order. "What can I get for you, handsome?" she asks with a syrupy sweet smile.

I glare. "I'd like Chloe, please."

"Don't you worry," she pats my arm, running her hand over my skin. "I can take care of whatever you need."

I narrow my gaze, glaring until she removes her hand. "I said I want Chloe."

"She isn't here," the other girl snaps, her smile gone.

Chloe works like no one I know, so she must be feeling really terrible. I stand, the waitress taking a step back. "I can get someone else."

"I want to know where Chloe is," I growl out.

She gives me that look that I get a lot, the one that lets me know she thinks I'm insane. "Ask Mike at the bar." Then she spins on her heels and stomps off.

I cross the room, not bothering with the shadows since the Russians are nowhere in sight.

Stopping at the bar, I slap my hand down, to get the bartender's attention.

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“Can I help you?” he looks up at me with a startled expression. I know I’m being difficult.

“Where’s Chloe?”

“Went home two hours ago, sick. Won’t be back for a few days, buddy, you’ll have to have another girl serve you drinks.”

“She’s sick?” I ask. She was fine like six hours ago. What did she come down with so quickly? A fever? Stomach bug?

“Yeah, man, she’s sick.” He gives me a skeptical up-and-down glare. But I’m out the door before he can ask me any questions.

I stop at a late-night Thai place and grab a takeout container of a noodle soup in chicken broth before I hop a cab to her house.

The place is dark, and for a moment I consider just heading up the fire escape, but the soup will do better if I enter through the front door.

So I raise my hand and knock.

Nothing happens.

I stand there for a good thirty seconds before I knock again...louder.

“Who is it?” a sleepy woman’s voice calls from the other side of the door.

“Killian,” I bark. “I came to see Chloe.”

I hear the lock unclick but when the door opens, I realize the chain is still on the door. Daff is standing, peering through the two-inch crack. “If you came to apologize, you should come back in the morning.”

“Apologize?” I ask, now thoroughly confused. “What are you talking about?”

“I saw what you did to her face,” Daffodil straightens her shoulders. “I’m not letting you in.”

“Her face?” My gut twists. “What’s wrong with her face?”

“Like you don’t know,” she sniffs.

“Open this door, or I will break the chain,” I grit out. Daffodil gasps but shuts the door in my face, clicking the lock into place.

I pound again. “Open the fucking door.”

The lock clicks again, and it opens with the chain still in place. Chloe stands on the other side of the door, her face turned to the side. “Don’t scare Daffodil, she’s just trying to protect me.”

“Protect you?”

Then she looks at me, her face swollen and my vision blurs with rage as I drop the soup. “Who did that to you?”

“It-it wasn’t you?” Daffodil asks from behind Chloe, her voice shaking with her surprise.

“Why would you think it was me?” I grunt, my hand coming to the knob. “Unlock this door, Chloe.”

“Killian,” she whispers. “It’s been a long night and I’m not sure it’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“I’m in over my head, here. Your family, their business. You. It’s...” Her lips begin to tremble.

I reach through the crack in the door, touching her hand on the jam. “I’m your monster, sweetheart. Let me in so I can protect you.”

She hesitates for another second and then she closes the door, and I hear the slide of the chain. I pick up the dropped soup and push the door open and then step in, locking it behind me, letting out a breath of relieved air.

Daffodil stands behind Chloe, looking at me with worried eyes. “You think I would do this?”

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“You told Sarah’s date you were going to let the homeless rape him,” Daffodil answers, raising her shoulders, like this should be obvious.

But I’m done talking to Daffodil as I set the container of soup on the counter and reach for Chloe’s face. “You still haven’t answered me. Who did that to your face?”

Chloe lets out a long breath. “This guy who was with Alexander.”

“What guy?” I look at the marks on her skin and I know that I’m going to end whoever touched her like this.

“His name was Preston. Preston Wingate.”

I go very still. Preston fucking Wingate? Gris has been asking me to take care of this problem and I’ve been putting him off... “Fuck,” I rumble as I wrap an arm under her ass and lift her into the air.

Her hands come to my shoulders, her body molding into mine. “My face will heal,” she says, “But the money I’m going to lose...”

“Baby, you don’t need to worry about that.”

“Killian, you’re not paying for things for me.”

I would. Her tuition means nothing to me. But I already know Chloe’s got a lot of pride in that regard and I’m not trying to take that away from her. “We’ll talk about who pays for what later.”

“Put me down, Killian.”

“Why?”

“Because,” she huffs out a breath. “Alexander and Preston told me they weren’t fans of your family, that I should stay away.”

I stop again. They targeted her, not just because she rejected Alex but because of her affiliation with us. With me.

My teeth grind together. “Do you want me to put you down because you think I’m causing the problems in your life?”

She looks away, nipping at her lip. “I can barely keep myself afloat. I can’t be caught in some...” She drifts off.

Very gently, I turn her face back to mine. “We’re fixing this. Starting with your job. Triston called Leo Kincaid, and Leo said he’d hire you at his nightclub, Temptation, whenever you want. Tips there are off the hook.”

She looks down at me for one second, her lips parting in surprise, before her mouth crashes down over mine. Her legs come around my waist, her arms wrapping around my neck. I slant her mouth open and dive in with my tongue. We haven’t made it to her room yet, so I stop in the hall, devouring her mouth.

She’s got on this cute night shirt, which gives me all kinds of access to her panty-covered pussy and I take full advantage, sliding my fingers over her until I’ve got my middle finger right on her clit.

“Ahem,” Daffodil says from behind us.

“Sorry,” Chloe gasps, but I don’t look back as I open Chloe’s bedroom door and carry her into her room. “We were supposed to sleep in my big bed tonight,” I say against her mouth.

“Did you really get me a job at Temptation?”

“I did. I’ll take you over tomorrow and you can meet Leo. You’ll like him, I think.” Secretly, I add that under Leo’s watchful gaze, she’ll be much safer at work. That guy is tough as nails. “Now tell me what happened tonight.”

In halting words, she tells me what Alexander said, what Preston did, making it clear that it was Triston’s intervention last night that provoked tonight’s attack. It was a message meant for my brother.

When she’s done, I lay her down in the bed, and then I pull the covers up her body. “You’re not staying?” she asks, propping up on an elbow.

“Not tonight.”

“But...” she nips at her lip. “Don’t we do this thing where we return favors. I kind of owe you.”

Satisfaction rumbles through me. I’m going to collect. But first... “How about you meet Leo tomorrow and then we’ll call the favor complete. After that, you can show me your appreciation?”

She nods as I straighten up.

“You could still stay.” She gives me this pleading look that makes me diamond-hard. “I don’t want to be alone.”

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I cross to her window and take her baseball bat, jamming it diagonally from across the top window sash so that it can't be opened and then I return to the bed.

“Tomorrow night, baby.” But I lean back down to kiss her again. “Tonight, I’ve still got work to do.”

“Work? What kind of work?”

“I need to talk to my brothers.” Which is true. But first, I’m going to do what I should have done a while ago. I’m going to tear that motherfucker Preston Wingate apart.

CHAPTERTWELVE

Killian

I’ve always known that killing Preston would be easy. But as I lounge in the desk chair of his hotel room, waiting for him to come back, I shoot Gris a text from my burner.

Making it happen tonight. Sorry I took so long.

The three dots appear, but I turn the sound off the phone, dropping it in my pocket as I hear the key rattle in the lock.

Preston enters his room, stumbling his way straight to the bathroom.

That’s when I hear him start to vomit.

Christ, it doesn't get any easier than this.

Part of me would like to make him really suffer. Tell him that he's being offed for Chloe and for Arabella. But explanations are for movies.

So instead, I move to the bathroom door.

He's just lifting his head, his eyes glazed and unfocused when he catches sight of me.

"What the hell?"

Grabbing the back of his neck, I smash his head as hard as I can into the porcelain of the toilet.

He slumps to the ground.

It's the oddest sensation. Usually, when I kill, I feel an initial sensation of satisfaction, followed by a deep loathing.

Tonight, I feel neither. Resignation beats in my chest along with my heart. I wait until I'm certain he stops breathing and then I carefully wipe the chair I sat in, the doorknob, and the back of Preston's neck before I go.

Everyone will assume that Preston fell and hit his head while drunk. They won't look much further, but I'm still thorough.

Slipping out of the room, I pull a hat over my head in case of cameras and cover my tattoos. I make my way down to the end of the stairwell, all the way to the basement level.

I'm near the pool and I can smell the chlorine as I head out the back entrance. The

Kincaids own this hotel. Preston should have had the fortitude to at least stay in a hotel not run by his ex's family.

He's a prick, though, and the Kincaids own the best of everything. Probably thought he deserved a hotel this nice.

I don't drive often...but the car I keep is a black Honda Pilot. It's not what anyone would think a guy like me would drive, but that's the entire point. It blends.

Hitting a few buttons on my Apple Car Play, I'm calling Triston. He answers, clearly half asleep as he slurs, "Hello?"

"I need a meeting."

"Now?"

"Yes. Call Mason and then call me back."

"Fine," he answers and then hangs up. I get it. It's three in the morning.

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I pull a burner from my glove box, which rings almost immediately, but it isn't Triston, it's Gris.

"Hey."

"How messy?" he asks, without even a hello.

"Pretty clean, but I'm working on all the details now. Waiting on Triston to call me back."

"Patch me in, and Killian..." Gris pauses for a second. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me," I answer roughly into the phone. "I should have done it sooner. I didn't get what it meant to have another man..." I clear my throat.

That's when I get the beep that Triston is calling me back. Merging the calls, I say to Triston. "Gris is here too."

"So is Mason."

Mason chimes in. "Do I need security on this call?"

"Yes."

Thirty seconds later, Jake Kincaid picks up. "It's three in the morning," he rumbles into the line.

“We’re all aware of the time,” Gris is going to take points on managing grumpy men, apparently, which is good because the Kincaids are his in-laws. And he’s better at it than me anyway.

“What’s happened?” Jake asks.

It’s Mason who speaks, “We need a cleanup before the morning workers clock in at Chateau Blanc.”

“I could have used some notice,” Jake replies. “Was this a planned thing?”

I grip the steering wheel tight as I arrive at my place, pulling my car into my garage. “He punched my girl in the face tonight,” I spit into the phone. “It was payback.”

Silence meets my words. Is it the vitriol in my voice, or the fact that I have a woman I call my girl?

“Chloe?” Triston asks.

“We can get into the details later if you prefer,” I answer.

“It’s all right, Kill, tell everyone now.”

“She works at the piano bar the Russians frequent. Alexander Ivanov has developed an interest in her and when you interrupted him last night as he was trying to pursue her...”

Triston snarls into the phone. “He was sending a message to me.”

“Chloe’s face looks like ground meat,” I’m not trying to make him feel worse. Just explain. “I could not allow him to hurt another one of our women.”

Jake coughs. “I’ll get it taken care of, don’t worry. I’ll have the body removed?—”

“He was drunk and his head hit the toilet. It’s such an unfortunate accident.” My voice takes on the necessary note of sympathy. I know no one is recording this call on burner phones, and that Jake has taken all the necessary precautions in terms of security, but like I said, I’m thorough.

“And if anything should come back my way,” I blow out a breath through my nose. “I know what my job is. My one request is that Chloe is cared for. She’s interviewing at Temptation tomorrow afternoon. She’s an artist and an art history major and she struggles to make ends meet.”

“Understood,” both Triston and Mason say at the same time. I smile. I’d be fine in prison as long as I knew Chloe was cared for.

I briefly wonder when that happened.

When did I go from I want to make her dirty, to I care about her feelings, to I’m concerned about her future.

But it doesn’t matter tonight.

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Stepping out of the Pilot, I hit the button for the elevator. I wish I could go to Chloe's, but instead, I strip my clothes off and toss them directly into the washing machine.

Then, I'm in the shower.

When I finally climb into bed, the sun is just lighting the Las Vegas skyline. I set my alarm for four hours from now and close my eyes.

When I wake up, I will start putting Chloe's life on the path she deserves. It will not be worse because I entered it, I'm determined to make her world better.

I really am turning into my brother Gris. But instead of being annoyed, I smile. Maybe after the job interview, she'll let me fuck her.

It's worth a try.

I might care about her future, but I still want to cover her in my cum.

CHAPTERTHIRTEEN

Chloe

My face doesn't feel any better when I wake up, in fact, it feels worse.

Swollen and tight, I head to the bathroom, assessing the damage in the light of day. It's bad.

I touch my cheek and wince, but still manage to brush my teeth before a knock sounds on my front door.

I already know it's Killian. It's close to ten in the morning. Leaving the bathroom, I head to the door.

"Chloe?" he calls from the other side.

"Coming," I answer, as I cross the room to unlock and unchain the door.

Killian stands on the steps holding coffee and a bag of something that smells like egg sandwiches.

They smell amazing. "No bacon and on a soft biscuit," he says, holding up the bag. "In case chewing is difficult."

I can't help it, my eyes well up with tears, because... "I still haven't eaten the soup you brought."

"That was for when I thought you were sick," he waves his hand, entering the apartment. He moves to the kitchen to set down my coffee when he points to the empty container. "I think one of your roommates got to the soup first anyway."

How dare they eat my soup. I let out a cry of indignation that makes my face throb and I lift my hand to cover the offending cheek.

Killian pulls me close. "I'll get you more soup. Promise."

I shake my head and then rest my forehead on his shoulder. "Thank you for the food."

"You're welcome. Now, eat up, so we can get you to your interview."

I grimace, which hurts. “I don’t think I should interview today. This is not a good look...”

“Trust me, it’s a great look.”

“What’s that mean?”

Killian runs his fingers down my spine. “Preston did the same thing to Arabella Kincaid. The Kincaids hate him and the fact that he hurt you...”

I lift my head again, my skin prickling right along with my irritation. “I don’t want to get the job just because Preston hurt me.”

“You’ll get the job because you’re the best,” he says giving me a little squeeze.

“You’ll probably get better pay because of what Preston did.”

My mouth falls open. “But?—”

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“Chloe, be all right with getting a little something back. You were hurt because of your connection with us. Take one favor for the same reason.”

It makes sense but I don't like it. I've been lowering all sorts of walls with Killian, but I still don't like the idea of getting perks from strange men. It rings all my alarms. Still, I slip out of Killian's arms and pick up the coffee, the caffeine doing a good job of making me feel normal.

It's not like I was winning at life doing things my way. I'm going to try listening to Killian by opening up and letting a few people help me.

I manage to eat half of my egg sandwich and then head to the shower. When I get out, Killian is lounging on my bed, a place he looks more and more comfortable, like he belongs there.

I'm getting comfortable too, I realize, as I drop my towel and pull out a pair of thong underwear. “What's the uniform at Temptation?”

“I'm not sure,” he answers, with a shrug. “I don't like places like that, too loud.”

I turn back to him as I pull on a bra, his eyes all over me, though he doesn't get up. “Does that mean you won't visit me at work anymore?”

“No. I'll be there as often as I can.”

I smile at him, ignoring the pain. “All right then.” Killian somehow became the person who makes me feel safe.

I wear my tight black pants that I always wear to work and my heels, but I choose a deep red scoop-neck top instead of my black oxford.

I brush my hair until it shines, pulling it over one shoulder.

Killian comes to stand behind me just as I reach for my makeup bag to pull out my coverup. “Leave it,” he murmurs, covering my hand with his. “You look fucking gorgeous.”

“I look like shit.”

He gives me a wolfish grin in the mirror. “After your interview, I’m bringing you back to my place to show you just how sexy you are.”

I heat, my nipples puckering under my bra and showing through my shirt.

“In fact, why don’t you pack a bag?”

“Do I have time?” I glance at the clock, noting that it’s half past eleven.

“You’ve got time,” he says as he grabs my makeup bag for me. “What else do you need?”

In ten minutes, we’ve packed the essentials and we’re off to my interview. Killian must have gotten an Uber, because a car waits outside for us.

Now that I’m on my way, my stomach fills with butterflies. I draw in a tremulous breath and Killian reaches for my hand. “Don’t worry,” he says as he winks. “This is going to be the easiest interview you’ve ever been on.”

I shake my head, even as I catch the driver staring at me in the mirror. I really wish

I'd put on that makeup. But I'm not going to start applying it now.

We arrive at the club ten minutes later, Killian helping me out of the car.

It's noon on a Saturday, the club won't open for hours, but I don't have to wonder how we're getting in.

As we approach the front doors, they open, and a tall, dark, and handsome man is standing in the opening to greet us.

"Chloe?" he says, giving me a smile. "I'm Leo Kincaid. Pleasure."

I reach out and shake his hand and then he ushers us inside. "Thank you for agreeing to see me, Mr. Kincaid."

He holds his hand out in invitation, to gesture for both Killian and me to walk down a hall to the left. We're in the large entry of the club but to the right, I see the club floor, cages all along one wall. Each has a giant pole at its center.

Leo stops. "Cage dancers use them, and they raise and lower over the floor using a hydraulic system."

"Wow," I say as I imagine what it would be like to dance twenty-five feet in the air.

"It's impressive and our dancers are some of the best in Vegas." He points down the hall. "It will be a real asset to have someone on staff with an artist's eye."

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I look over at Killian, my lips parted in surprise. He's been talking me up. Which makes me emotional all over again. But Killian only places his hand at my back, escorting me down the hall.

We enter what must be the dancer's locker room, but there are no dancers. Instead, it's full of well-dressed men.

I recognize Triston and Gris. But there are others I don't know. All stop to turn toward me and I my heart freezes for a moment in my chest.

I shift closer to Killian. He wouldn't let anyone hurt me, would he? His hand spreads out on my back. "You remember my brother Gris?"

I give a quick jerk of my chin. "Nice to see you again."

Gris steps forward. He's married to Arabella, I remember that. "I'm sorry the circumstances aren't better, Chloe, but I'm pleased to see you again as well." He reaches out a hand to shake mine and it sincerely makes me feel more at ease. I shake his hand, even as he partially turns back to the other men, still holding my hand in his. "I'd like to introduce Mason Kincaid and Jake Kincaid."

I barely keep from gasping. Mason Kincaid owns a tremendous amount of Las Vegas real estate. You can't live in this city and not know his name.

He reaches out to shake my hand as well, Gris letting go and stepping back as Mason approaches. "I'm very pleased to meet you."

I don't know how to answer him. He can't mean it. I'm nobody.

Letting go of my hand, he pulls a card from his pocket. I've been collecting a bunch of these, the past few days.

But while his name and number are beautifully typed on the front, the name on the back of the card isn't Mason's. My brow furrows.

"I've taken the liberty of making you an appointment with my personal real estate agent this afternoon."

"I'm sorry?" I look at him, my confusion clearly written on my face.

Mason is the kind of man that exudes power. It rolls off him in waves. He looks to Killian, cocking his head. Is he asking Killian's permission for something?

Killian pulls me into his side. "We're all concerned that the Russians might try and hurt you again, now that they know you're affiliated with us."

My mouth drops open, my eyes going wide. I shake my head. "What does that have to do with a real estate agent?"

Mason gives me this polished smile. "I own several condo complexes that have available units and topnotch security. At least until all of our business is settled with the Russians, we'd like to make sure you're not in danger."

Are they moving me into an apartment? I shake my head, panic filling my chest. Tapping Killian's ribs, I draw in an uneven breath. "Mr. Kincaid, please understand that I can't?—"

"Chloe," Killian rumbles, "You can't stay in your apartment. It isn't safe."

I look at him then, the worry in my eyes surely on display. I don't give men I don't know, or men I do know, power over me. "You know how I feel about allowing..." I don't finish, not wanting reveal too much.

His jaw hardens. "I know. I'll find a solution that suits everyone."

The air rushes from my lungs in relief. For a girl who doesn't usually give men power, I'm being pretty liberal with what I'm allowing Killian.

But like I said, there is something so honest about him, I just don't worry about his hidden agenda.

He nods to Mason and then leaves my side, with a final pat on my back, walking out of the room with Mason, Jake, and Triston all following him.

Leo and Gris remain in the locker room, however.

I tug at the hem of my shirt, smoothing the fabric as I straighten my shoulders. Mason's offer rocked me a bit, but I've got to get into interview mode.

Leo smiles as he points to another door. "Would you like a tour of the club?"

I nod, even as Gris offers me his arm. Is he taking the tour too? I slip my hand into his elbow, as he leans close, "Leo is my new brother-in-law. Four brothers and four brothers-in-law," he tells me with a chuckle. "It's a lot of testosterone."

I smile at that. "I bet."

Leo rolls his eyes up at the ceiling before he leads us through the club, showing us, not just the dance floor, bar, and upper loading area for the cages, but he also takes us through the offices to his personal office. He moves around the desk, leaving the door

open, as he gestures for Gris and me to sit on a loveseat against the wall.

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I've never had a job interview like this one.

"So," he asks. "What did you think of Temptation?"

"It's gorgeous," I reply, meaning it. "Thank you for even considering me for a position."

"It's my pleasure," he waves his hand. "It's nights and weekends, but you're used to that, correct?"

"Absolutely. With my weekdays filled with classes, nights and weekends are great."

"The position is forty to fifty hours a week, though twenty of them are on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday."

I nod. I'd love hours like that. "Killian told me that the tips here are excellent. I can assure you that I'm both skilled and hardworking, I'll do my best to serve Temptation's customers?—"

Leo holds up a hand. "Triston gave you a personal recommendation already in terms of your skill as waitstaff, but I'm not looking for a server."

My chin snaps back, confusion knitting my brow. "You're not?"

"I need a floor manager. Starting salary is eighty thousand, hours are set, as I mentioned."

“I...I beg your pardon?”

Gris lets out a small chuckle. “Chloe,” his voice is gentle.

I turn to him, growing even more confused. “Yes?”

“We really appreciate your discretion with both our brother Killian, and with all that’s happened with Preston and his associates. You could have acted very differently.” He smiles, looking exactly like Triston with his ease and polish. “Whether you continue to be associated with Killian or that relationship runs some natural course...”

I cannot get my feet under me today. “Natural course?”

“Leo and I want you to know that you have personal friends with the Smiths and the Kincaids.”

I shake my head, not able to speak. I’m working my way up to refusing. I don’t want favors from powerful men.

“Speak for yourself,” Leo rumbles. “I’ve been trying to hire a new floor manager for three months now. This isn’t a courtesy, I need someone used to navigating waitstaff and able to keep her head even when a situation becomes stressful.”

A small laugh bubbles from my lips. Because those were the words I needed to hear. “You’re not hiring me as a favor?”

“Hell, no,” he winks then. “It’s a tough job. I need a tough lady to do it right, and I think you’d be perfect.”

I nod. “Thank you, Mr. Kincaid.”

“Leo. Managers call me, Leo.” He stands again, reaching his hand over the desk.
“Tell me you’re joining the Temptation family.”

I stand too, taking his hand. I can’t believe it, but I’m actually getting a break. A good job, more money than I ever imagined. “I’d be thrilled.”

“Welcome to the family,” he replies, with a firm shake.

Excitement bubbles in my chest. For the first time in a while, I feel like things are actually getting better and I am moving toward my goals.

That usually means my world is about to fall apart.

CHAPTERFOURTEEN

Killian

Gris walks into the backroom where we’re having a far grittier meeting than Chloe’s job interview.

“Chloe?” I ask, knowing that even her name is enough.

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“Leo’s having her fill out the paperwork and scheduling her for training,” he waves his hand. “He did a fantastic job of making her feel at ease, made her feel like she was an asset.”

“She will be,” I answer with a glare at my brother.

Gris smiles in return. “Of course she will be.”

Mason clears his throat. “I’m all for pride, I really am, but why isn’t she willing to move into one of my buildings?”

I frown. “She’s got history with men abusing their power.” I don’t want to say too much. I just need them to understand so that they don’t push her too hard.

Triston narrows his gaze at me. “I can see how that would make it difficult for her to trust. What I am trying to understand is how you, of all people, managed to breach her defenses.”

It’s a fair question. I’m not sure I understand myself, now that I think about it.

“Whatever the reason,” Mason rolls his shoulders. “You need to get her out of her place.”

“She’ll stay with me until I can convince her to move,” I answer. “I’ll see to that.”

Mason looks satisfied, but Tris and Gris wear matching looks of bewilderment. Fucking twins.

“Have you been possessed?” Gris asks, shaking his head.

“Don’t be a fucking dick,” I snark back.

“There’s my brother,” he returns.

I actually get his point. I’m not sure I even feel like me. Killing Preston aside, this calm has been filling me the past few days is disconcerting.

Like I’m not just darkness, there is room for light, and joy and... I shake my head as conversation moves back to our mutual problem. The Russians.

“I can see why they’re trying to make a move now,” Mason says with a shrug. “With our families joining forces, they know we’ll have the power to do whatever we want. A single casino joined to our tunnel will not allow them to keep pace with either of our families, so they’re trying to double deal in order to keep some measure of power.”

Yeah. If I were the Russians, I might be looking to make a move too. But they’re going to get themselves killed or run out of Vegas.

“I know that Chloe has found herself in the middle of our problems,” Mason taps the table. “Your job will be to remove her from them.”

I look at my brothers who nod in affirmation. “That’s not my usual duties.”

“Not true. You’ve always been involved in protecting the family.”

I guess so. It’s just usually less shielding and more straight up killing. I’m not sure I mind the change. I might be good at a role more like Jake Kincaid’s. Security.

I don't want to sit behind a desk looking at quarterly reports, but I could get behind creating systems that monitor and protect.

The conversation continues but I find my thoughts drifting. I've never thought of myself as having a real future.

I didn't think I deserved one, to be honest. But keeping Chloe safe...it adds some layer of meaning for which I didn't even know I was searching for.

We finish up a half hour later, and I head out to wait by the front doors for Chloe while she completes her paperwork.

Mason stops by my side. "Get her to look at the apartments. You can stay with her, but they have state-of-the-art security, and the building is built to withstand a nuclear war."

I'm surprised Mason is being so insistent, and my look must communicate my thoughts because he pats my arm. "Your work, her sacrifice, is about to make my life significantly easier. She should be rewarded and so should you." It's a nice thought, but I know Mason well enough to see that he also might really just want to keep an eye on us.

Is he worried Chloe might talk? I'll go off the deep end? I'll take Chloe on the tour, play nice. But if Mason thinks he's watching me, I'm watching him right back.

Mason turns to leave, Jake following behind him as he gives me a nod. I reach out a hand to shake and he takes it.

"Pleasure to meet you, Killian."

“And you.”

He lets go of my hand. “I’m hoping to speak with you as you continue to gather intel on the Russians.”

“What about?”

He leans closer. “There are two factions of Italians. One is willing to work with us, but the other is definitely not friendly. Can we sit down so I can go through the ins and outs?”

“Of course,” I answer. “If you’re inclined, I’d like to learn some basics about your position at Kincaid as well.”

His eyes widen before his face breaks out in a smile. “A man of your skill deserves more than the basics. Come by anytime. As we expand, I could use some help, and with the blending of our families, you’d make the perfect addition.”

Well. How about that? Chloe wasn’t the only one who left today with a new job.

My girl appears, a pleased smile tugging at her lips as she shakes Leo’s hand. She walks toward me, looking light on her feet. “I got the job,” she whispers. “I start the day after tomorrow, just training, but it’s so much money,” she gushes in a whisper.

I return her grin. “Great job, baby girl.”

“Thank you, Killian. For this. I know I wouldn’t be here...”

“No problem,” I take her hand. “Ready to go look at some new places?”

She tugs her hand from mine. “I already told you, I don’t accept favors from powerful men. Well...except for you.”

I shake my head. “This isn’t a favor, it’s payment. You and I helped the Kincaids identify a new enemy before they’d even made a move.”

Her eyes widen in understanding. “And I’ll take the favor if you’re uncomfortable. But the Kincaids have top of the line security and I won’t compromise on your safety. So what do you say? Can we go have a look?”

I see the softness that fills her eyes. “What are you doing to me?”

“Charming you?” I’m joking. Everyone knows I’ve got none.

She leans in and then pushes up on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. “That’s it exactly. Who would have believed that you, of all the guys, would be Prince Charming?”

“Let’s not go crazy,” I chuckle, but I’ve got to be honest. I like the way she sees me. I like it a lot.

But hope and happiness are dangerous emotions for a man like me. I try to ignore the voice that warns I wasn’t built for happily ever after. I’ve always known that.

I was born of darkness, and darkness is where I will return...

CHAPTERFIFTEEN

Chloe

We get back to Killian's in the late afternoon. He immediately orders me soup, which sounds amazing, and I change into comfy leggings and a tank top, then return to my easel.

The place we looked at with the real estate agent was the nicest place I've ever seen in my life. A luxury condo with every amenity in the world including vaulted ceilings, high-end appliances, and a shower that had like six heads. I didn't even know that existed. That doesn't even include the private elevator that opened right into the place. It was ridiculous.

But I love the light in Killian's place, and I don't even turn on the overhead lights as I paint by the rays of the afternoon sun.

Killian doesn't say a word, just lets me work.

Just like yesterday, he feeds me and sits on the couch, stripping off his shirt before he does.

With a smile, I keep painting.

"Do you want to be a painter, like in your heart of hearts?" he asks as he lounges.

I straighten up, my brush perched over the canvas. "Do I want to sell paintings that I've made?"

“Yeah.”

“I’ve always assumed I couldn’t. That no one would buy them because they weren’t good enough, or that I didn’t have the connections to make it happen.” I shift as I nip at my lip. “But, if we’re talking heart of hearts, I’m not sure I want to sell them. It’s so personal for me. They’re all about what makes me sad or happy, they are my diary.”

Killian gets up then, walking toward me, but I hold out my hand. “Stop. Don’t come any closer.”

“Why?”

“Because,” I lift my shoulders, giving him a side eye, “this painting is a surprise.”

“A surprise for me?” His gaze lights and sparks. It makes my chest tight to see the life in them, the stars that shine in the dark brown depths.

I point my paint brush back toward the couch. “No peaking when I’m not here, either.”

He walks backward, keeping his eyes locked on me. “No one but my mother gives me anything.”

I’ve met his brothers, so of course, he has a mother. But Killian was so emotionally cut off when I met him, I’m having a hard time even picturing him with parents. “Are you close to her?”

“She’s one of my favorite people in the world.”

I cock my head as I consider those words. Maybe that tracks. He has softened to me very quickly, treating me like something precious rather than a thing to be used and thrown away. “Is your father as important?”

“My father is dead, but we were never close.” I hear the hardness that creeps into his voice, watch his muscles tense. Setting the palette and the brush aside, I close the distance between us.

I’ve got a bit of paint on my hands, but he doesn’t hesitate, pulling me into his arms, as he sits on the couch and folds me into his lap. “Was he like a workaholic, being a duke or whatever?” I try to ask a follow-up question that might help me understand without pushing too much. I can feel Killian’s resistance.

“He wasn’t a duke, and he barely worked. He mostly lived a lavish life as a spare to the dukedom, running up amazing debts.”

Ouch. I wrap my arms around him. “What happened?”

He shakes his head looking at the far wall, but his eyes have taken on that same dead look they had when I first met him. His touch, however, is still gentle. “He died of a heart attack, but it was obvious that it was at least partially drug-induced. The debts were a problem, but we’ve tackled that as a family. Tris and Gris both have an excellent business sense, so they were able to correct his mistakes and then some.”

“I can hear that he’s hurt you, Killian.” I slide my fingers into his hair. “What happened?”

But, instead of answering, he stands as he sets me back on my feet. “Nothing. Work on your painting while there is still light.”

I start to ask him again. I shared my worst memory with him. But before I can get the words out, he's shrugging past me, heading to the kitchen. "I'm getting some water. Want a glass?"

"No thank you," I whisper, still watching him. His shoulders are stiff, his posture defensive.

With a sigh, I head back to my easel, giving Killian several long glances as he leans against the counter, his back to me. He sips his water, the muscles in his back flexing with his movements.

"Killian," I call.

"Yeah," he answers, half looking over his shoulder but not making eye contact.

"I...thanks for having me here."

He turns then, his body relaxing. "You're welcome, baby girl."

"Tomorrow or the next day, I'll maybe get some more stuff, if you're all right with me staying for a bit?"

He starts toward me again, all the darkness gone. "Of course I am, and I'll come with you to help."

I nod and then pick up my brush. Whatever Killian's father did, the wound is deep. Deep enough that it's what makes him dark.

He's not ready for me to pry into it, but we've got a tit-for-tat thing going, and if I can tell him, then he can share with me too.

I paint for another hour before I lose the light. I could turn on all the overhead lighting, Killian's place is amazing like that. But I'm tired and I've been hearing about this bed for a few days now. So instead, I go to the sink and wash out my brushes.

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“Done?” he asks, where he’s reading his phone on the couch.

“For today,” I say. “I don’t know about you, but I’ve been short on sleep.”

“Yeah.” He walks across the room, I hear the thud of his feet on the cement before he presses his front to my back. “Bed sounds like an excellent idea.”

I smile, knowing we’re thinking the same thing. No man has ever made more of a difference in my life and since we’re all about exchanging favors, it’s time I showed him just how much I appreciate what he’s done for me.

My hands are still in the water as he slides his over my hips, pulling my ass tighter into the cradle of his hips.

He nuzzles into my neck, nipping and sucking at the soft flesh at the base. I lean my head back on his shoulder, the feel of his body and his hands like a balm.

For a moment yesterday, I was a victim again. And then Killian came crashing in, throwing all kinds of protections around me.

I’ve been living on my own, afraid to trust, but now that I’ve let him in...it’s amazing how much easier every part of my life feels.

He slides his hands from my hips, across my belly, and then between my legs, cupping my mound in his giant palm. We both groan, my hands frozen in the warm water spilling from the faucet, as my body shivers with desire.

He runs a finger along my seam, his other hand spreading out over my stomach. “Going to bed early is fun,” he rumbles close to my ear and then chuckles.

I laugh too, finally dropping my brushes in the sink before I turn off the water. “I just need to clean up?—”

“Tomorrow,” he says, sliding his finger between my legs again. “Right now, we’ve got a date.”

“This is a date?”

He’s kissing down my neck again. “As close as I get.”

I look back then, even as he circles my clit through my leggings. “Let me see. You’ve fed me three times today, watched me paint, took me to a job interview and a real estate showing. I think it might be like fifty dates all rolled into one.”

His fingers still as he straightens. “I suck at dating.” Then he smiles. “To be expected, I suppose.”

“I don’t think you suck at it,” I shake my head. But I mentally add that it would be easy for me to lose my head and my heart to this man.

And while I’m wide open to Killian, tonight made it clear that he’s still got a lot of walls up.

It’s funny, because we started in the most unconventional way possible, but I have somehow come to the conclusion that Killian is a catch. The kind of guy every girl dreams of landing.

Protective. Helpful. Strong. But he still leaves room for me and what I need. I doubt

I'm the girl that gets to have that for too long.

Wasn't Gris trying to tell me that today?

Whatever the future holds, I'm going to enjoy Killian for as long as I've got him.

"Maybe it's just casual dating I'm no good at."

A laugh bursts from my lips. "I will agree with that. Nothing has been low-key since the moment I met you."

He laughs too, but his finger is still rhythmically sliding between my legs, a light touch that has me getting all sorts of tense. "We'll take the rest of our relationship at whatever pace you're comfortable, sweetheart."

I turn then, my wet hands sliding up his bare back. "I like your pace just fine, Killian." And then I kiss him.

He holds me close, kissing me back, his tongue sliding into my mouth as his hands cup my ass, pulling me tight against him.

My answer is to lift one of my legs, wrapping it around the back of his, opening up to him.

He rumbles against my lips, the vibration making me ache, as he grabs my knee and pulls the leg up to his waist. It makes his cock press right into my most sensitive parts. "Mmm," I moan into his mouth, my body arching deeper into his.

He massages my ass, making my clit rub against his rock-hard tip. "Yeah, baby girl," he says between kisses. "Make all the noise you want. Want me to lick your pussy?"

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I throb at the idea and then gasp at the wave of pleasure that rolls through me.

He lets out a deep satisfied chuckle against my lips. “I love having your cum on my face.”

Then he’s lifting me, my other leg wrapping around his waist as he carries me through the loft.

I lift my head long enough to marvel at his strength, the way he doesn’t strain while supporting my weight, before he captures my mouth with his again, the kiss demanding every ounce of my attention.

Holding onto his neck, my fingers dig into his skin as I squeeze him with my thighs, rubbing up and down his stiff cock.

He kicks open his bedroom door, barely breaking the kiss. It isn’t until my back hits the mattress that I open my eyes. The setting sun fills the room with enough light that I can take in the room.

There is nothing but a bed and a single nightstand. But he’s right. The bed is huge.

The linens are all a crisp white, and I break the kiss to turn my face and brush my cheek across them. “Soft,” I murmur, letting go of his neck with one of my hands to smooth my palm over the comforter.

“You’re going to be very comfortable sleeping here,” he says, even as he kisses along my jaw, before he reaches my earlobe and sucks the sensitive flesh between his teeth.

“You have a blanket or something?” I ask, my eyes fluttering closed as he sucks at my neck, making my skin sensitive with all the sensation.

“Why?”

“I don’t want to get all these beautiful things dirty...”

“Fuck that,” he rumbles into my collarbone. “I want the smell of you all over my bed.”

“Oh,” I gasp, flushing with pleasure, as he yanks at the hem of my tank top, pulling it up my body and over my head. He takes advantage of the way I have to lift, to unclip my bra.

Then he’s back on top of me, his bare chest rubbing against mine. He feels so good, I let out a groan, threading my hands into his hair.

But he doesn’t stay still for long. Dipping lower, he sucks one nipple between his lips, palming the other, before he switches, my back arching off the bed to give him more access.

Which only encourages him to start kissing down my stomach, hooking the waistband of my leggings to shimmy them down my hips.

They only make it to my knees, however, when his mouth lines up with my pussy and he dives in, tongue first. I’m so sensitive, I scream out, a little pain, a lot of pleasure setting me on fire.

He rips my leggings the rest of the way off before he spreads me wide and dives back in.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Killian

The tang of Chloe's pussy dances on my tongue as I devour her.

I hold her hips in my hands, angling her body to give me more access, as I lick right where I know she needs it.

Her hands are twisted in the bedding she wanted to preserve, even as she drips her sweet nectar on the bed.

I always said I wanted to dirty her up. She's dirty now, making a mess of my bed, and I fucking love it.

I insert a finger inside her, then two, feeling her stretch. I want to put my cock in her so bad, but my girl is tight. The slickness helps, but as she adjusts to two fingers, I add a third, feeling the stretch.

Her thighs start to shake, her moans growing louder and higher pitched as she brings one of her hands back to my hair, digging her fingernails into my scalp. I hope she draws blood. I want her to mark me.

With a final gasping sob, she breaks apart, cumming so hard, she curls up and off the bed with her shoulders and head, her eyes screwed shut.

It's beautiful and I keep my eyes on her, even as I keep working her, letting her ride out all the pleasure.

When she finally collapses back on the bed, I push up, shucking my pants off in a quick move that has my cock springing out and pointing right at her, like it knows

exactly where it wants to be.

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“Chloe. Baby.” I run my palm over her belly, drawing in a long gulp of air as I prepare to ask the question.

“Yes,” she says as she grabs my hand and pulls me back down on the bed, bringing my chest to hers.

Are we at the point where I don’t even need to ask the question? She just knows what I’m thinking? “Are you sure?” My cock is already nestled at her entrance, sliding just inside her hot, slick pussy. “I want you to be sure.”

“I’m sure,” she answers, opening her legs a little wider, which makes me sink in a bit deeper.

She feels so good, hot, wet, tight, that I can’t help myself and I push in deeper.

I feel her wince and I still. I’m resting on my elbows, but I place my hands under her head, bringing her lips to mine.

I must taste like her, but she doesn’t wince away, as I kiss her until she relaxes. Then I push in a little deeper.

I’ve got half my cock inside her and I know I’m a lot to take, know that she must be so stretched. I can feel her stiffen in pain. “You all right, luv?”

“Okay,” she says between a few little puffs of breath. “It might have been a mistake to give my virginity to you.”

It's my turn to stiffen and I start to pull out because, I know I'm a mistake. I've always been a mistake.

But her legs lock around mine, stilling my withdrawal. "Killian?"

"I..." I shake my head. "I know I'm a lot."

I feel her relax as she kisses along the scruff of my jaw. "Your monster cock? Yeah. It's a lot."

Right. We're talking about the size of my junk not the fact that I've never been worth much. I drop my forehead to hers, my eyes closing as I slowly begin to push back inside her. "I'd never want to hurt you, Chloe." I'm surprised how deeply I mean the words. I'd do anything to keep the bad parts of me from ruining all her beautiful colors.

"I know, Killian." Then she tilts her chin to kiss me again. "Why do you think I'm here right now?"

I finally seat myself fully inside her, her sheath so tight around me, I start to shake because it feels so good.

No woman has ever...

But I can't even think as I slowly withdraw and then push back in. I keep my movements light, easy, ignoring the need to pump into her with mindless abandon.

But the slower I go, the harder the pleasure hits me, pulling me so taut, I squeeze my eyes shut, the cords of my neck popping out with the effort it takes to control the urge.

Her hands slide down my back, her lips pressed to my ear, as she murmurs sweet little nothings.

I'm sure they're words, but I can't process them, my brain is so fritzed by the feel of her pussy tight around my cock.

No one has ever loved me like this.

Made me feel cared for, made me feel wanted.

Not just for my looks, or my money, Chloe...she values me. It's my final thought as, with one quick thrust, I cum, filling her, my body convulsing over hers.

She holds me close like she's comforting me, and I collapse on top of her, burying my face into the crook of her neck.

It's the moment I know that'd I do anything for this woman. Anything.

I slide to the side, pulling her with me, but as I look down at our bodies, I can see the blood that's covering my cock.

Shit.

Pulling her even tighter to my chest, I note she might have been right about the bedding, it's covered in blood too, not that I care.

I'm up in a second, her in my arms.

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“Where are we going?” she asks, before she peeks over my shoulder and sees the mess too. “Shit!”

I chuckle, still nuzzling her neck. “I’m going to put you in a nice hot shower, sweetheart, then we’ll change the duvet.”

“I can try to replace it.” She’s lightly tapping my back as she nips at her lip. We reach the bathroom, and I step into the walk-in shower, turning on the overhead rain shower as well as the wall-mounted head. Warm water blasts us both. “How much does a comforter like that cost?”

I know Chloe’s got this thing about people helping her. I assumed it was pride, but this doesn’t sound like pride. It sounds like fear...

“First of all, I’m pretty sure I’m the one that made the mess,” I say, lightly setting her on her feet. “Second. You can splatter paint all over my floors and couch, get blood all over the bed, break the countertops?—”

“Killian.”

“I don’t give a shit about stuff, and I don’t care what you take from my life, Chloe. Take as much as you want. It’s still way nicer to have you here.”

CHAPTERSEVENTEEN

Chloe

Those words explode something inside my brain.

Take whatever you want.

My mother killed her first two marriages by taking what she wanted. And the third, she let me pay the price for her needs.

It's a thing with me, and I get it. But I can't just take from people around me. It fills me with loathing and dread. "I would never?—"

"Abuse what I offered," he finishes for me, grabbing the soap. His hands come to my back as he starts to scrub down my body. "There are takers, Chloe, and you aren't one of them. You could take to what feels like excess to you and I would still be like, baby girl, take more."

He's scrubbing the blood from my thighs as he says these words, and I feel the tears that prick at my eyes.

I hold onto his shoulders, gripping him like I'll collapse without his strength. That's the thing about Killian. I can put my weight on him, he's strong like that. I feel myself curling around him. "I'm not sure it works like that."

Very gently he rubs the blood from between my legs, before he looks up at me. "Tell me how it works."

"In the beginning it's all take whatever you want. Here's my credit card. And then soon it's, I can't afford that and how can you be so selfish..."

He chuckles then, and the sound of it, like he's very amused, makes me stop, frowning at him.

“Sorry,” he says, though he doesn’t stop laughing as he stands. “I lack a lot. And you should be guarded with me for many reasons. But money is the one thing I have in abundance. Well...that and muscles. You can’t use those up either, sweetheart.”

The words make my knees weak, I appreciate them so much. But in terms of really believing them, I’m still not sure.

When we’re done in the shower, I collect up the comforter and Killian shows me to the laundry room. All this man does is take care of me, the least I can do is treat the stain.

But I step into his laundry room, my eyes going wide. The washing machine is huge, there’s a folding table and racks for hanging clothes. I search through the cleaners, finding one for treating stains and then wet the blood spot in the large sink, scrubbing the blood.

Killian must have put a spare comforter on the bed, because he comes back to the laundry room, lounging in the doorway, one shoulder against the jam as he watches me.

“I hope it comes out,” I say, stopping up the sink, to let the stain soak over night.

“We’ll just get a new one if it doesn’t. Maybe I’ll get red, then we can fuck even when you’ve got your period.”

I straighten, my eyes bugging out. “How long do you think I’ll be staying here?” What I really mean, is how long does he think we’ll be seeing each other...

But he must think I’ve meant something else. He shrugs as he answers, “Might be a while. Mason moves fast but the Russians are like the ticks of Vegas. They’re burrowed in deep, and they might be difficult to pull out.”

I shake my head. “You’ve got a way with words, you know that?” But I lick my lips. “And I didn’t mean to insinuate I’d be staying. I meant how long do you think?—”

“Of course you’re staying,” he glares at me. “You have no protection at your place. There is no way you’re going back there.”

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“Killian,” I start. He’s not actually proposing that I should live with him, is he? “I can’t...”

“We don’t have to move into one of Mason’s buildings, but you’re not going back to that shit apartment with feeble locks and girls who will cower in their rooms if there is trouble.”

“I appreciate what you’re saying but?—”

“If you’re trying to tell me I can’t order you around, I should remind you, I’m not much for following rules.”

“You can’t order me around, actually,” I straighten, throwing a glare of my own. But his points about my apartment not being very secure are sound. I’m just not sure I’m ready to uproot my life and live with a guy I just met.

“I know how to piss people off, or make them nervous, that’s for sure.” He pushes up to standing, his feet spreading out into a wide defensive stance. Does it bother him?

“You don’t make me nervous. I like that you say what you’re thinking, because then, I never have to guess.”

Then I lean back over the sink, pushing the comforter deeper into the hot water.

But before I’m done, Killian is behind me, his arms wrapping around my middle, his stomach and chest pressing to my back. “Thank you.”

I cover his arms with mine, wet hands and all. Because I've just realized that I'm giving him something that's been in short supply in his life. Acceptance.

"It's just a big step to live here and we just met..." I look back at him asking him with my eyes to understand.

"Let's just take it a day at a time. How about that?"

That seems reasonable. It would be nice to paint when I want, take long, hot showers. Sleep in Killian's arms. I'm not ready to commit, but I can enjoy the moment. "I'm hungry again. Want to get something to eat?"

"You never ask me to feed you," he murmurs into my hair.

I smile, sinking into his embrace. "I could cook."

"Tonight, I feed you, you've fed me enough today." And then he straightens but keeps an arm around me to lead me toward the kitchen.

I could argue. Say that all he does is feed me. But I think I'm beginning to understand my value to Killian is beyond his fixation with my ass.

"What do you feel like?" he asks. "Pizza? Thai? Sushi?"

I wrap an arm around him too, burying my nose into his chest. "Pizza. It feels like a carb kind of night."

He orders up a pizza and we sit in the semi dark, watching the lights of the Vegas skyline shine bright.

I never get to see Vegas like this. My view of the city is usually grit and hardship.

From up here it twinkles and glitters. I finally get to see its beauty.

It's been the strangest, most wonderful day. I'd like to freeze this moment and replay it again tomorrow.

But tomorrow will be a new day and who can say what it will bring...

CHAPTEREIGHTEEN

Killian

I loved sleeping with Chloe at her place. And I'm not talking about the sex, but about the actual sleeping. It's not something I expected, the connection of having her body against mine in her most relaxed state, and it's been the best bonus.

But in my bed, it's even better. She still sleeps in the cradle of my arms, pressed to my torso, our legs tangled together, but unlike when we're jammed in her bed, my feet aren't hanging off the end, the blankets are large enough to cover us both, the mattress is soft enough to settle her even closer.

We went to bed early but it's nine before we get up, and I think we both needed that kind of sleep.

I might have needed a rest like that for actual years. I can't remember the last time I slept so well, barely waking, going right back to sleep the few times I did.

Chloe is wearing one of my T-shirts, the fabric now up around her chest. I skate my hand over her hip and up her belly. I'm honestly not trying to start anything, I know she's going to need a little time to heal after yesterday.

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I just like the feel of her skin under my hand. She's so silky and soft, it's another comfort I never expected and I'm going to enjoy taking full advantage.

I let out a breath, her hair blowing up and landing across my cheek. I rumble out a small laugh as the strand tickles my skin.

Fuck me, I'm like a smitten kitten.

"What's funny?" she asks, cracking open an eye as she asks in a sleepy voice.

"Your hair is tickling me."

"Tickling? You mean to tell me you're ticklish?"

She reaches back then, her fingertips dancing up my side toward my armpit. "Don't you dare," I growl, catching her hand. It's her turn to laugh, cute little bubbling giggles that make me warm inside.

I catch her fingers, pulling her body and turning her so we're spooning. Then, wrapping her arm and mine around her torso, I playfully bite at the sensitive part of her neck.

Her giggles turn to shrieks as her feet kick out.

I'm laughing too as I roll on top her, play biting at her shoulder. It's this moment of quiet fun I haven't had in forever. Not since I was a kid.

But the memories of what killed my simple joy as a child, steal it again now as I stop biting, easing off her.

Laying on her stomach, she lifts her head, her eyes full of her questions. “Where did you just go?”

I shake my head, and start to roll away, off the bed, but her hand on my chest stops me. “Killian?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know what I like best about you?”

This is a question that erases my pensive thoughts, replacing them with curiosity and appreciation. How did she know I needed her affirmation? “My cock?”

She snorts even as she smiles. “No.”

“My muscles?”

Her hand slides from my chest to my biceps. “They do make me feel very safe, but no, they are not what I like best.”

I turn back toward her, pulling her stomach to mine. “The fact that I live in the shadows and can see all the monsters?”

Her eyes search my face. “I’m glad you’re not calling yourself a monster anymore, but no, that’s not it either.”

“I am a monster,” I say to her, my previous thoughts slamming back to the front of my brain. And then I’m off the bed, striding toward the bathroom.

“I like your honesty.”

I stop in the doorway, turning back to her. “What?”

“I like that I don’t have to wonder what your true intentions are. I always just know. Even when I don’t like them, I know them and then I can respond to them. That is what makes me feel safe with you, when I don’t with anybody else.”

I stare at her, blinking in surprise. “Everyone hates how much shit I just let fall out of my mouth.”

“Not me,” she whispers. “I like it.”

I’m back to the bed in an instant as I practically dive on top of her. No one accepts me for who I am.

They all look at me with worried eyes, even my family treads cautiously around me, leaving a wide path.

I kiss her, not just with passion, but with tenderness and...gratitude. This swell of emotion fills my chest as I taste her.

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She wraps her arms around me, threading her fingers into my hair.

The kiss isn't fast, but it's deep. Her legs wrap around mine, our bodies moving together as I kiss her over and over, tasting her.

My hands are sliding up and down her sides, moving under her ass to give her cheeks a squeeze before skimming down her thighs.

In every way I can, I'm drinking in as much of her in as possible, wanting to know her. I finally leave her mouth but it's only to kiss my way over the skin of her jaw and neck, noting every freckle, every mole.

I kiss each one before I move down her chest, stopping to lick her nipples until they pucker into stiff peaks. I want to make my girl feel good.

And somehow, miraculously over the last few days, she has become mine. I can't quite believe it, but she's given me things that she's given no other man.

And I'm giving her something I've never given another woman...my heart. I'm falling in love.

I stop to nuzzle her belly button, drawing another giggle from her, even as I hold her hips in my hands. "I'm going to know every inch of you before I'm done."

I feel her stiffen at my words and I lift up to see her grimace. "How long do you think that will take?"

My brow scrunches. “Until I know every inch of you?”

“Until we’re done?” she whispers back. And then she starts to try to wiggle out from under me.

I hold her hips, keeping her in place as my eyes narrow. “You’re staying here until the Russians are no longer a threat. We’ve already agreed.”

She nods, relaxing a bit. “Right. Yeah. That makes sense.”

I can feel what’s been lost between us. Is she feeling the connection too? Did it bother her that I mentioned the end?

I can see that. But how I’m feeling about her doesn’t really change the fact that I’m not a happily-ever-after kind of guy.

I could end up in prison tomorrow. Or dead.

But I know something has shifted, because while I’ve never really cared about my life, it bothers me to think of her being alone. That no one would care for her.

Fuck.

I lean to nuzzle her belly button again, but her body is still stiff under my touch, not relaxed and pliant like it was before. I kiss along her belly to the seam where her torso joins her leg. “I’ll tell you what. Once I’ve learned every inch of you, we can renegotiate...”

“Sure.”

“You’re going to be sick of me by then, but if you’re not?—”

Her head snaps up then. “Sick of you? It’s more like, you’ll be done with me.”

Right. Abandonment issues. “No woman has ever made me feel more seen and accepted than you, Chloe. Do you know how powerful that is for me?”

She partially sits up but it isn’t to leave. This time, she’s tugging at my arms, inviting me up her body.

When our mouths crash together again, there is an urgency that wasn’t there before. Her legs lock around my waist as she pulls my hips closer.

“Luv,” I murmur against her lips. “It’s too soon after last night. You’re body needs?—”

“I need you, Killian,” her green eyes lock with mine, shining in the morning sun. “Please.”

This “please” holds enough desperation that I know I can’t deny her.

I manage to unlock her legs long enough to get her underwear off and then I’m ripping my own down my thighs, settling my hips between her open ones. Cradling her body against mine, I slowly sink inside her.

She’s still tight, but I can feel the difference today, her flesh more easily yielding to mine. And when I’m all the way inside her, I hear her gasp and feel the shiver of pleasure that moves down her body. “Oh...wow...” she rasps in my ear. “That is...”

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“Yeah, baby girl,” I groan pulling out only to plunge back in, giving her just what she needs.

Her body arches to take even more of me in. Yesterday was beautiful, but today, my balls are on fire.

I’m trying to keep my thrusts deep but not hard. I don’t want to hurt her.

But Chloe is arching to meet my hips as she grabs my ass, encouraging me to go faster, harder.

“Be honest,” I grit out, “my cock is really your favorite thing about me.”

She lets out a small breathless laugh, even as she moans again, the head of my cock pushing right where she needs it.

I ratchet up the pace, wanting to give her everything I’ve got.

She starts making these keening cries of pleasure, her legs so tight around me, I just might break.

Fine by me. I’d break for her any day.

Her pussy gets tighter and tighter with every thrust until she finally comes undone, her scream of pleasure making me break too.

I start cumming as she grips my cock so tight, I think she might wring out every last

drop of cum I've got.

Collapsing onto her chest, I gather her close. I'm not sure I have the words to tell her what that meant but I start to try and explain. "Chloe that was..."

"I know," she whispers back, her arms tight around my neck. "Can you promise me something?" she asks, her hand stroking down my back.

"Yes." I don't even need to know what it is. I'd give her anything.

"When you're done with me, just tell me the truth...okay?"

I look down at her, stroking my fingers over her cheek. "I only meant I was going to kiss every inch of you until I was done mapping your freckles. Which, I got distracted and never finished, so we're going to have to try again."

What I don't add is how I'm not sure I'm ever going to be done with her.

But she'll get sick of me, and if I'm honest, it's likely to be sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Chloe

We finally make it out of bed and into the shower. And then, I insist on making us breakfast at lunch time. Killian feeds me all the time, I want to return the favor.

When we're done eating, I carry the dishes to the sink, even as Killian comes up behind me. "You going to paint this afternoon?"

"Yeah," I answer, glancing back at him. "I'm going to ignore the world today, I think."

Tomorrow, I'll have to get more of my stuff at my place, and quit my job at the piano bar, since I start at Temptation on Tuesday."

"You going to call and tell your boss?"

"It would be better to do in person." One thing I am not, is a coward.

Killian rumbles behind me. "I don't like it."

"I'll go before hours when it's just staff," I say. "Take a cab over, and I'll pay the driver to wait so I can leave right away once I'm done."

"I'll come with you," he says, giving my hips a light squeeze. "Tomorrow?"

I nod. "Does that work for you?"

"Yeah. It's good." He nuzzles my neck, his hands on my hips.

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I look back over my shoulder. “What are you doing today?”

“I’ve got a meeting at Smith Brothers Real Estate.”

“It’s Sunday.” Of course, I always work on weekends, but Killian has a real job.

“That’s the thing about owning your own business, I guess. Weekends don’t mean much. Especially not in real estate.”

I look at the loft, knowing that it must have been expensive. “I don’t mean to pry, but you said last night that it was impossible to spend all your money. Does that mean...”

“If you’re asking if I’m rich, the answer is yes. When my brother inherited the dukedom, he had enough funds to pay off my father’s debts. By carefully selling off a few properties, he gave us seed money, with the express direction to grow the family’s wealth. We started with ten million.”

“T-t-ten m-million?” My stomach swoops and I’m lightheaded. My mother sold me out for a credit card that allowed her to spend two thousand a month. I can’t even imagine having that kind of money.

“But we’ve grown that to close to half a billion dollars.” Killian tosses out these numbers like they’re nothing, but I’m gripping the sink.

“You can’t mean that number.”

“The Kincaids outearn us by leaps and bounds.” He pats my ass then. “But I’ve got

enough, like I said, you can't spend it all even if you tried." He moves away, grabbing his wallet and keys from the secretary near the door. "Knowing you, I'd doubt you'd even make a dent in my bank account."

His words still make my head spin. "I understand a little better now. But I'm still not sure I agree. It's not about the amount, I don't think. It's about the feeling. At some point each of my mom's husbands realized she only cared about how much she could spend and not about them."

Killian stops and then he's coming back to me, lifting me into his arms, soapy hands and all. "You are the only woman I have met who has ever made me feel seen. I know I'm not a credit card to you, Chloe, and a man can't put a price tag on that feeling."

"Oh." The blood rushes in my ears as I look down at him. I have no experience with this kind of relationship and no example to follow.

He kisses me again, and sets me down, his hands lingering for a moment before he finally leaves.

I head to my easel, my brain full of Killian and all these new feelings as I fill my palette with paint and begin working.

I'm nearing the end of the galaxy and starting on the body, which I'm also doing in shades of blue.

I close my eyes and picture the swoop of his shoulders, the thickness of his muscles, the strong line of his jaw.

The painting cuts off just above the eyes, but I chose this on purpose. It allows me to really emphasize them, and I fill the dark shades of his irises with light specks that

sparkle like stars.

I lose all track of time as I work, lost in color, the feel, the mood of the piece. I pour my feelings for him into the work.

When I first met Killian, I thought he was red. Angry. But the longer I'm with him, the more I feel his calm. See his care.

A knock sounds on the door, and I raise my head, instantly tensing. Without Killian here, I have no idea if I should answer the door.

I pick up my phone to text Killian when I realize he texted me forty-five minutes ago saying that his brother Rush was dropping in.

"Hello?" I call.

"Chloe?" a male voice calls in a posh accent. "I'm Killian's brother, Rushton. May I come in?"

I cross to the door, peering through the peephole. I recognize Rush from the coffee shop, so I open the door with a smile. "Hello."

He steps inside, his smile of greeting filled with mirth. "Am I interrupting?"

"Not at all. Why do you ask?" I close the door, even as he reaches out and runs a thumb over my cheek.

I start back, not expecting to be touched and he winces. "Sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you. It's just..." And then he shows me his thumb, now covered in blue paint.

A laugh bursts from my lips. “Don’t be sorry. I’m sorry...I...” My giggles subside. “I can be a bit skittish, I suppose, maybe Killian told you.”

Rush shakes his head. “Nope. Then again, Killian isn’t really much of a talker.”

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“Huh,” I say, trying to figure that one out. Killian isn’t chatty, but he’s not silent either. We actually talk a lot more than I ever imagined. “Interesting.”

Rush crosses his arms, a thoughtful expression crossing his face as he gives me an appraising glance. “Does he talk to you?”

I’m not sure how to answer. I mean the answer is yes, but I have no idea why Rush is asking, why he’s here, or what Killian would want me to say to his family. “He’s not much for discussing the weather, sports, or politics.”

Rush chuckles. “No. I’d imagine not.”

I clear my throat. “Killian texted you were coming but he didn’t say why.”

But before Rush answers, another text from Killian pops up on my phone.

Is he there?

“Is that Killian?” Rush asks. I nod and then text back.

“He was worried about leaving you alone,” Rush supplies, moving into the loft. But he stops as he catches sight of my painting. “Holy shit.”

My skin heats. “Yeah. Sorry. Is it weird? I don’t usually show people my stuff, I...”

“Chloe, it’s amazing,” he stares at it, his gaze narrowed in focus. “I mean, I can’t believe...how serious are you and Killian?”

That last question catches me off guard. “I guess it is weird that I’m painting him after only knowing him for a short time, but he’s kind of an anomaly in my life.”

“Killian is definitely an anomaly. But that wasn’t what I was talking about. I can actually feel the emotion just from looking at your painting.”

Was I blushing before? I must be scarlet now. “He hasn’t seen it,” I whisper. “I asked him not to look.”

Rush turns to me then, his brows raised in a question like he can’t figure out what’s going on between me and Killian. I can’t even remember what the question he asked me was, though, so I step around him, picking up my palette again. “Why did Killian send you here?”

Rush shrugs. “He’s worried about the Russians.”

“Coming here?” I know what Alexander did at the piano bar. And I appreciate Killian not wanting me at my place. There is no one to protect me on the off-chance Preston or Alexander figured out where I lived, or followed me, though I don’t know why they would.

Honestly, it all seems kind of dramatic, but since I’m really enjoying my time here, and I want Killian to feel at ease, there doesn’t seem much point in arguing.

“Yeah. Something like that.” He moves toward the couch. “You don’t need to entertain me. I’m just going to hang out while Killian finishes up with Triston and Mason.”

“Mason? But he’s not part of your company, is he?”

Rush shrugs. “Yes and no. He built this tunnel under Vegas, and everyone wants to

connect their casinos to the tunnel, including us. Though, we've already accomplished that goal so it's a matter of ironing out the details with him and deciding if we do even more business together."

I set the brush I'd raised back down. I'd seen the billboards for the tunnel project. It's the latest greatest way to drive foot traffic. "You have access?"

"Yep," Rush winks at me. "Thanks, in part, to Gris's marriage."

"Do the Russians have access?"

"No."

I think I'm starting to understand all the connections of the people I've met. "And Preston was Arabella's fiancé, but when they broke up, he..."

"Started hanging out with the Russians." Rush says the words, but I can hear his tone get more clipped, like he doesn't really want to discuss these details.

I'm not sure why the Russians would want Preston around since he isn't part of the Kincaid family anymore, unless he knew stuff about them? But I doubt Rush is answering many more of my questions on this subject.

He's been way chattier than anyone else, which I appreciate.

I raise my brush instead, understanding better that I've stepped smack in the middle of an existing feud. "How long has all this been going on?"

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Rush shakes his head. “That’s a tricky question. It started ten years ago?—”

“Ten years!” I stop painting again.

“Well, that’s how long the Kincaids and the Italians have been at odds. The Russians are a new addition.”

“I think I might need to take notes and create a chart,” I mutter as I start painting again.

Rush chuckles. “Too true.”

Silence falls again. I won’t ask Rush how long Killian plans on having me stay, it’s a question I’ll ask Killian myself. He said a few weeks, but this seems like a much bigger problem than a few weeks will solve.

But it’s only quiet for a few minutes before Rush breaks it. “So. How serious are things with you and my brother?”

I stop painting again. Looking around my canvas, my gaze meets Rush’s. “My own history would require notes and a timeline too.”

He quirks a smile. “Okay.”

“Which means, I have never done anything like what I’m doing with Killian, so I have no idea how to gauge...seriousness.”

His eyes light with understanding. “I understand. Killian doesn’t do much dating either, which is why we’re all curious.”

It’s not like I didn’t know that, but hearing Rush say it fills me with satisfaction. Rush is classically handsome, polished like Triston is polished, and my guess is he does loads of dating. “It’s not like we’ve even been out on a real date,” I mutter, starting again. “But he did tell me that I make him feel seen.”

“What do you see when you look at Kill?”

“I don’t think you should call him that,” I answer. “He thinks he’s a dark void. But I think he’s like space. It appears dark at first, until you start to see all the beautiful specks of light.”

Rush doesn’t answer. Maybe it’s presumptuous of me to tell him about his own brother, though he did ask.

“He talk about our family? Our parents?”

I’ve always got the sense that there is some real serious shit in Killian’s past, but he’s been silent about it. I shake my head. “No. Only a few cryptic comments.”

“Mmm,” Rush mumbles. “Too bad.”

This is starting to feel like an interrogation. “Did Killian send you to dig into my head?”

“No,” Rush quickly says. “In fact, he’d probably be pissed. But he’s not acting like himself and?—”

“How is he different?”

“Well, in some ways, he seems more present than he’s been for a long time. But then he goes off and just whacks Preston, and then I start to worry he’s fallen deeper into his hole.”

Some cold dread washes down my spine. “Whacks Preston? What does that mean?”

CHAPTERTWENTY

Killian

Triston taps his finger on the desk in front of him. “So we’re in agreement? It’s time to sit down with the Russians?”

I glare at my brother. If he thinks I’m going to civilly sit at a table with the Russians and look at Alexander after the way he treated Chloe, he’s the crazy one. “I won’t be there.”

Triston glares right back. “Yes, you will.”

“No.”

“And what’s more, you’re going to growl and spit and play bad cop.”

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“I am bad, and I’m no cop,” I fire back. “Don’t have me there, unless you’re prepared for bloodshed.”

Mason has been quiet, his gaze moving between us, as Triston bangs the table. “I know you’re capable of controlling yourself, Kill. I refuse to believe you can’t.”

I grit my teeth together, curling my lip. “My control is not the problem. It’s his. He put his hands on her twice and I won’t let that slide. Ask me again, Triston, and we’re going to have a problem.”

Mason clears his throat. “I am very grateful for the way you’ve handled yourself, Killian.”

I look at the other man, expecting to find him smirking, or at least to know that he’s patronizing me, but complete sincerity fills his gaze. I blink in surprise.

“The fact that you held off on killing Preston, gathering scores of intel on the Russians, and then managed to make Preston’s death appear accidental, have both been advantageous to us.”

I give a quick jerk of my chin to acknowledge his compliment.

“But I would just like to add that taking your time with Alexander will also be to our benefit.”

My fist clenches against my thigh. “I don’t?—”

“I need to divide the Russians and the Italians again, and I can’t do that if you attack now. You’ll have your chance once we’ve made them enough promises that they cease their collaboration. Then we’ll drop the bomb on both of them—separately.”

I see his point. It’s an excellent strategy, but Alexander threatened my woman. I know we’ve put some protective measures around Chloe, but I won’t really breathe easily until I know Alexander is no longer a player in our world.

But before I can argue the point, my phone rings, Rush’s name coming up on the screen.

“Yeah?” I pick up before the phone has completed one full ring.

“I fucked up.”

“What happened?” I’m out of my chair and striding toward the door, ignoring the concerned stares from both Mason and Triston.

“Killian?” Triston calls after me, but I ignore him, as I leave the conference room and start down the hall. He can fire me if he doesn’t like it.

“I think it’s bad,” Rushton half whispers.

“What’s bad?” I grit into the phone.

“I told Chloe that you whacked Preston.”

I stop dead in the middle of the hall. “What the fuck did you just say?”

Triston runs into my back. Fucker must have followed me. I turn to give him a snarling glare. He’s close enough that he must hear Rush’s next words. “We were

talking about you, and I mentioned that she's been good for you except for..."

"Rush," I snap, scrubbing a hand down my face. "How did she react?"

"She locked herself in your master bathroom."

"Fuck!" I yell, my voice echoing down the hallway.

"What happened?" Triston asks, his voice dropping low.

But I don't answer. This sick dread fills my chest. How will Chloe react to what she's learned?

"I'm sorry, Killian. I was trying to tell her that you seemed more animated than you've been in years, but then I fucked up and told her about your?—"

I hang up the phone as I see Triston's gaze narrow, his nostrils flaring. And a new worry fills my chest. Chloe knowing about some of the illegal shit we do is a problem.

Turning away without a word, I stride down the hall. Talking has never been my strong suit, and I don't try now.

Triston follows. "What does Chloe know? What did Rush say?"

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“None of your fucking business.” I keep going, walking faster as I pull my keys from my pocket.

“We both know it is,” Triston is still behind me.

“I’ll take care of it.”

“No,” Triston grabs my shoulder. “We need?—”

I spin and swing, clipping my brother in the jaw. He stumbles back, not expecting the hit. Good. He needs to understand something. No one is touching Chloe. And I will fight anyone who tries.

That’s when I see Mason standing outside the door, his arms crossed as he assesses us both.

I don’t need to ask to know what he’s thinking. I’m a volatile guy. Mason is a man with unlimited resources. If he decided I was a problem...

But I’m not going to worry about that yet. One issue at a time.

I take the stairs down to the garage two at a time, getting into my Pilot and weaving through traffic until I reach the loft.

I can hardly contain my twitching as I step into the elevator.

I barrel through my front door, slamming the door closed again, the sound echoing

through the loft. I find Rush standing in the middle of the living room, worry drawing every line of his body tight.

“Chloe,” I call out, walking past him and down the hall, into my room.

Rush follows. “I told her I only meant that you hit him, but I don’t think she believed me.”

“I have too many brothers,” I growl.

His phone rings, and he stops in the hall to answer. I keep going, closing the bedroom door and locking it, before I move to the door to the bathroom, raising my fist and knocking. “Chloe.”

Silence meets my call, and I go from uneasy to fucking frightened. “Open the door or I’ll break it down.”

“Killian,” she cries back. “Don’t make me.”

The sound of her voice calms me. “I just want to know you’re all right.”

“Are...are you...promise you’re not going to touch...”

My skin crawls. Is she really asking if I’d hurt her? I try to remind myself that she’s got history, but it fucking cuts deep inside that she thinks I am the kind of violent that I would hit a woman. “Is that what you think of me?”

The door unlocks and she cracks it open, her eyes red and puffy. “I don’t know what to think.”

“Why? What is it you think I’ve done?” I want to hear her say it.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what you’ve done,” she cries. “That’s the point. We’ve been moving way too quickly. How do I know?—”

My chest caves in. “What do you mean?”

“I thought I could do this because you were honest. Because I knew where I stood. But I don’t know a thing, do I?”

The truth is that she’s right. She has no idea about my past, or even most of what I do in the present. I’m crazy and she’s messed up.

There is no world where we work. I smack my hand against my forehead, letting out a deep cry of frustration.

Because despite all that, she’s the only person who I think might actually see good in me, and I can’t lose her.

Chloe looks at me the way everyone looks at me. Like I’ve lost my mind. Like I’m crazy. “Don’t look at me like that,” I snap.

“Like what?” she asks, her voice just above a whisper.

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“Like you think I’m broken. Like you think...” But I can’t even make myself say the word.

“If I think you’re broken, I think I am too...” A tear slips down her cheek.

I don’t know what she means by broken, but I know she can’t leave me now. And I’m not talking about my emotional needs. Between the Russians, Triston, and the look Mason gave me, Chloe needs to stay with me. If anything happens to her, the entire world will see the depth of my insanity. I will burn the whole fucking thing down. My family. The Kincaids. Vegas. I will reduce it to ash and rubble.

“Chloe.” Her name comes out rough with all the aggression coursing through me and she takes a step back.

“I think I should go back to my place,” she whispers. “We need time?—”

“No,” I growl. “You’re staying with me.”

Her eyes widen as the color drains from her face. “Killian. Don’t scare me.”

“I’m not, sweetheart.” I force myself to relax, though it goes against every instinct. “I’ll sleep in the guest room if that’s what you need. I swear I won’t touch you, but I want you to stay here. Please.”

The word please seems to break through her fear because her brow furrows. “You’re worried about me?”

“Of course, I am.”

“Can you tell me what happened with Preston and when?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Not because I’m hiding the truth from you. But because it involves people beyond me and because you’re safest the less you know.”

She looks to the side, catching her bottom lip between her teeth. “I’ll stay in the guest room.”

I wish I could find the words that would bring us back to last night, when she let me inside her, gave me her virginity.

But I’ll take this. Just knowing she’s safe in my home.

And I’m going to have to figure a way for both of us to get out of this mess. Because I’m comfortable in the shadows. But it’s no place for Chloe to live. She deserves the light.

CHAPTERTWENTY-ONE

Chloe

The guest room is cold and lonely. I’ve gotten used to the feel of Killian’s body against mine, warm and secure, and I can’t fall asleep. Finally, at some point after one in the morning, I push up from the bed with a sigh.

I’m so angry at him.

And a little scared too. Did he have an altercation with Preston? When did it happen? What did he do?

I've always known Killian was dangerous. It rolls off him in waves. I just thought...

I thought he was my monster.

And, I guess, when I really think about it, if he's out there punishing men who've hurt me then he is...

But part of what I've been denying is that his violence could turn on me. He scared the shit out of me when we first met and that man is still there, hiding under his new exterior. He's softened so much, but I remember how he was.

The one who put me over his knee without a care how frightened he made me.

Giving my heart to him would be such a risk, and if I'm honest, I've been completely risk-averse all of my adult life.

I push up from the bed, determined to get a glass of water and then try to go to sleep. But the moment I step out in the hall, I find Killian sitting against the wall across from the guest room door.

His eyes meet mine. "You're awake."

"Yeah." I don't tell him I can't sleep as I walk past him and out to the kitchen. He gets up and follows.

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I reach for a glass, turning on the faucet. I know he's got some fancy water dispenser on the door that filters and aerates the water, but I just use the tap, filling the glass and then take a big drink. "Why are you in the hall?"

"I don't like leaving you alone."

Is he serious? "I'm in your house. What's going to happen?"

I see his mouth twitch and I know there is a whole bunch he's not telling me. I take another drink and then start for my room again. Killian is one step behind me.

Finally, I stop, and he nearly runs into me. "What are you doing?"

He runs a hand down my spine. "I miss touching you."

"You promised," I answer, twisting my neck to look over my shoulder and glare at him.

"That's right, I said I wouldn't touch you if you didn't want me to, and I won't. But that doesn't mean I'm not thinking about it."

"What do you want, Killian?" I'm half annoyed, half curious. It makes me feel better that he's repeated his promise.

"I want," he starts and then wraps an arm around me, whispering in my ear. "I want to suck on your clit."

Of all the things I expected him to say, that was not one of them. My whole body responds, my nipples peaking, the sensitive bud of nerves between my legs aching. “I don’t think it’s a good idea,” I whisper, but I can hear the lack of conviction in my voice.

He presses his chest to my back, his cock settling against my ass. He wraps a hand around my front, his palm splaying out on my belly as he pulls me closer. “You don’t have to give me anything back. Just let me touch you.”

“Killian.” My voice nearly breaks. “We’re moving so fast. I need...” Time. Space.

“An orgasm to help you think clearly?”

I can’t help it. I laugh. That’s when his fingers slide down my belly. I’m wearing a short nightgown and he easily slips under the hem, the pad of his middle finger sliding over my panties.

My head falls back, my body arching into his touch. “How badly did you hurt Preston?”

I feel the tension that draws him taut. “I want to be clear. I’d hurt anyone...anyone who tries to hurt you.”

“Oh.” He presses the pad of his middle finger right on my clit. I didn’t get any of the information I’d hoped about Preston, but his words go a long way in soothing some of my worries. “Which bed?”

He growls out his satisfaction even as he wraps his other arm around me, lifting me off my feet.

He carries me into his bedroom and lays me on the bed, still on my belly, my legs

hanging over the side. I look back at him, just as he tugs my underwear off my body and then spreads my legs open, crouching down on the side of the bed.

Just as he promised, he locks his lips over my clit and sucks, causing a scream of pleasure to rip from my lips.

I immediately clutch the bedding, my body going rigid. “Killian,” I cry out. He’s relentless, sucking and licking until I’m so close to falling over the edge, I’m begging him not to stop. That’s when he eases back on his heels, long enough to ask, “Can I cum on you after?”

“You can cum in me,” I cry, knowing that what I actually crave most is a connection to him. It’s so crazy, but even though I’m mad at him, I want his comfort.

He shucks down his pants, kicking them off before he lines himself up and starts sliding inside me.

From behind, he hits even deeper, fills me even fuller and the small of my back arches, lifting my ass in the air to take even more of him in. He wraps his hands around my waist so that he’s pulling me into his thrusts, filling me so full I’m gasping for air in the best way.

“You take me so good,” he grunts, his voice rough and gravelly. And then he bends over my back, kissing my neck. “I could be your soldier, Chloe. Don’t you know that?”

I do know. One of his hands slides under me, his middle finger pressing to my clit. My insides start to quake as the orgasm builds inside. “I think I might love you, Killian.”

The words are out before I can take them back. He only picks up the pace, pushing

inside me so deep that my eyes roll back in my head as I explode in an orgasm, my screams of pleasure echoing through the room.

He cums a moment later, roaring with his finish before he collapses on my back. We lay there for a minute, just panting into the silence. His weight is a comfort, his heartbeat, as it slows, a comfort.

I half fall asleep under him, tired and ready to curl into his arms.

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That's when he whispers in my ear. "You're the only woman for me, Chloe. There will never be another." And then he pulls me up the bed and settles me under the covers, his body curling around mine.

I've spent most of my life alone. To be held like this, to be this close to Killian, is like a balm to a wound.

But also...it's a danger that is like walking on a knife's edge.

It's my last thought before I fall asleep.

I wake in the morning, sore but satisfied.

Killian is still behind me, his arms tight around me. "Good morning," he murmurs close to my ear.

"Good morning." I smile a little, so comfortable I don't want to move an inch.

"Painting today?"

"Sleeping," I mutter back as he smiles into my hair.

"Should I make you something to eat?" he asks. That's what pulls me awake as I turn my head around to look at him.

I touch his face, "No. I'm all right." I know I need to revisit last night. I both feel closer to Killian and further away.

I've touched one of his sharp edges and I'm still smarting.

I close my eyes again, wondering if I might be able to go back to sleep. I will say one thing about Killian's place. It's so quiet and comfortable, I've slept better here than I have in years.

He kisses across my shoulder. "You said you wanted to get some stuff at your place?"

"Yeah. I have to pay rent too."

"Why not give up the place?" he says, his hand skating over my hip. My lips purse, my eyes opening again. We are not ready for that. I'm not ready to be that tied to Killian, no matter how deep the feelings are getting.

"This is just for a few weeks, remember?"

"What time do you want to go over to the club?" he asks, as he pushes up on his elbow.

"Nine. That's when the manager usually arrives for the ten o'clock opening." I touch the bruises on my face. He'll have a hard time arguing with my position.

But now, I'm awake and so I get out of bed, stretching before I start for the bathroom. Killian follows, turning on the shower while I brush my teeth.

These moments are so easy, I could forget the other side of Killian. "Have any work to do today?"

"I've got some paperwork that needs to be done," he answers over his shoulder.

"Maybe I'll paint then," I start for the bathroom door. I need to pee, and I don't think

we're at the stage where we go in front of each other.

"I'll bring my stuff out to the counter and work while you do."

I cock my head, looking at Killian. It's the strangest thing. He started so cold and now he doesn't even want to work in a separate room... "All right. Sounds good."

We take a shower, the kind that takes forever and is thoroughly satisfying. Then we eat and start our Monday.

I'm making great progress on the piece, and I feel good about it. Killian sets up at the island, working the morning and afternoon away. At one point, he takes a call, disappearing into his office, where I hear the beeping of the fax machine.

As the sun sets, he stretches, picks up the phone and orders dinner. "Mind if I turn on the telly?"

"Not at all," I say, assessing the shadowing I'm completing on the chin. It's got to look strong, commanding, but I don't want the look to be too harsh. The longer I know Killian, the more I feel his softer side.

I distantly hear the news playing as I mix some of the blue with black, dotting an almost stubble along the jaw. He somehow sports a constant five o'clock shadow.

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That's when Killian's phone rings. "Triston."

I lift my head, hearing the tension in Killian's voice. That's new. He pushes off his stool, heading for his office again. "There is no problem," he grits into the phone. "I already told you."

I drop my paint brush onto my palette, my head turning as I strain my ear. I don't mean to eavesdrop, but clearly there is some issue between Killian and his brother.

Not able to hear, I walk over to the sink instead to rinse my brush. I've been at it for hours. Dinner is coming soon, and it seems foolish to dive back in now that my concentration is broken.

I'm nearing the end, where then it will just be tweaking until I finally just make myself stop and call the piece done. It's been so long since I got to paint like this, working for hours at a time to complete a painting. It's been wonderful.

Setting the brush aside, I start to clean up my paints and turn my easel so Killian can't peek.

But that's when the news catches my attention.

"The body of a man found dead in his hotel room has been identified. Preston Wingate, member of the American legacy family of the same name, was found dead early yesterday morning, in an apparent accident."

I go still as a picture of Preston flashes across the screen. He's on a yacht dressed in a

nautical sweater and collared shirt, sporting wind-blown hair and a charming smile.

The blood drains from my face.

When Rush said that Killian “whacked” Preston, surely he didn’t mean this? The reporter said it was an accident.

I shake my head, my trembling hands slowly setting the palette down on the floor. It has to be a coincidence that Preston is dead. Right?

But my insides quake as I piece together some of the details. Killian tucking me in my bed. Not staying with me. That was Friday night. Preston was found Saturday morning...

I find my shoes and still wearing my paint-covered leggings and bright orange tank top, walk out the front door to the elevator.

I don’t know where I’m going, but it doesn’t matter. I need a minute to think, a minute that Killian is not there to tempt me, while I figure out what the hell is going on and just how bad I’ve messed up.

The ding of the elevator sounds through the hall making me jump. But I step in and quickly press the button to close the door.

Once they slide shut, I squeeze my eyes closed, my heart hammering in my chest. I think I’ve made a terrible mistake...

CHAPTERTWENTY-TWO

Killian

I hear the elevator ding even as Triston is barking in my ear. “It’s a problem that Chloe knows you’re involved with Preston’s death. I know you like her, but you cannot allow a woman you’ve known for a few days destroy our family, Killian.”

Words crowd my mouth. There is so much I could say...but none of it would help, so I hang up.

Triston can go fuck himself.

It’s not that I don’t care about my brother. I’ve given myself wholly over to my family. But Chloe is where my heart will live, I know it. I’ve always been this way. One instance can change my whole world, pivot my entire view, and then.... My path is set. When I feel, I feel with every fiber in my body.

I walk out of my office, my papers on the counter, her brushes in the sink, but Chloe isn’t here.

“An investigation into the death will be conducted.” The announcer on the telly chirps, her co-announcer clucking his tongue.

I look at the telly, seeing the smiling face of Preston fucking Wingate staring back at me. Cold dread runs down my back. Fuck.

Running into my bedroom, I do a quick search for Chloe before I’m pulling on my boots.

It’s not quite eight, but the sky is darkening, and I need to find Chloe before the sun sets. I don’t want her out there alone in the dark.

I know she’s spent years out in Vegas alone, but it makes me crazy, and that was before...

Before I dragged her into this whole mess.

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Alexander shares his portion of guilt. He was angling for her before I was and he forced my hand, I can admit that. But if something happens to her tonight, that's on me.

I hit the button on the elevator, pressing it seventeen times, with increasing irritation, before the doors finally slide open.

The ride down to the garage takes forever and I wish I'd just taken the back stairwell when the doors finally slide open.

It's only been a minute. I half expect to catch sight of Chloe at the exit, but I don't see her anywhere. Crossing the garage, I briefly consider trying to follow on foot, but I have no idea which way she went.

Sliding into the Pilot, I fire up the engine, peeling out of the garage.

I start driving as fast as I can get away with, up and down the streets near my house. Whatever Chloe's thinking, whatever she saw, we need to talk...

I need to tell her...

I grit my teeth. The truth. She's with a stone-cold killer and that's a choice she has to be all right with.

Fuck.

Even if she doesn't choose me, and let's be honest, she might not, she has to know

that I will always protect her. That there are forces out there way worse than me, and I will always be her harbor in a storm.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Fifteen minutes pass and I still haven't caught sight of her.

I drive for another ten, the tension in my body growing so taut, I think I might snap. I've only got one play left.

She said she'd head to the piano bar at nine. Putting on my turn signal I park several blocks from the bar. Nothing about the Pilot stands out, and this far away, Chloe could pass it and not even notice that it's me.

Locking the car, I slip into the shadows, making my way to the bar.

I'm going to have to tell Chloe as much of the truth as possible, because if I don't, I'm going to lose her.

Then again, when she knows who I really am, I'm likely going to lose her anyway.

But that's the next problem. First, I have to find her.

I approach the piano bar, but stop, sinking deeper into the shadows. From the opposite direction, Chloe appears, still wearing her paint-covered leggings and bright tank top. Even in the low light she glows.

Her arms are wrapped around her middle, but she still walks with purpose as she approaches the bar.

Relief makes my shoulders relax as I let out a long breath of air. She's here and she's

safe.

But rather than enter through the front door, she walks past it, toward me, taking a left into the alley.

My insides drop. It makes sense that employees enter and exit through the back, but I've seen some real shit go down in that alley and my girl is all alone.

That's when I hear her scream.

CHAPTERTWENTY-THREE

Chloe

The alley is eerily silent as I enter. Frequently the kitchen door is propped open as crates are being loaded in, employees hustling in and out.

But not tonight...

Monday is one of our quietest nights, it's part of the reason I chose tonight. But I hadn't considered that quiet meant...no one would be around.

I pause, wishing that Killian was by my side.

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Which is ridiculous. I just ran from his home without a word of explanation, and now I want him here... I'm such a chick. But the story about Preston...

The reporter had said it was an accident. But I can't help but recall that night over and over. Killian tucking me in bed, telling me he had business to attend, and then leaving my apartment.

My steps slow. What frightens me about the idea of him killing Preston? Do I feel safer in a world where Preston doesn't exist? I do.

If Alexander were dead, I know I'd feel better.

But it's what I don't know about Killian that frightens me. How violent is he? And would that violence ever turn on me? I can't ever be in that position again. At the mercy of a strong man who has the power to break me.

I take a steadying breath. What do I know about Killian?

I know that he feels a deep connection with me, one that I share. I also know that he feels isolated from the world. Different.

I absolutely know that when I ask him about his feelings or his needs, he always answers with a stark honesty that many wouldn't like, but I appreciate. Adore even.

I asked him, Would you hurt me? And he answered. Can I trust his answer? My hands leave my waist and relax around my sides for the first time since I left his place. I think I could.

He tells me the truth. And what he doesn't tell me, is also for my protection. I'm sure of that.

Drawing in a deep breath, I straighten my shoulders, starting toward the back door. I'm going to quit and then I'm going to return to Killian's. I don't need to know his family's business, or even what he did or didn't do to Preston. I just want to understand his nature.

But a low moan from the shadows makes me stop again.

Peering into the darkness, I see the crumpled shape of a man. Stepping closer, he moans again, moving just enough that I catch the puddle of blood by his head.

I let out a scream, the shock catching me off guard.

But that's when a hand clamps down over my mouth, an arm locking about my arms and ribs. "If it isn't my favorite waitress."

It takes me a few beats to realize who has his hand over my face. Alexander.

My heart, which was beating loudly in my ears, freezes. I try to unlock my muscles to run, to fight, but I can barely get them to work.

He pushes me toward the body, toward the outer wall of the bar. That, at least, brings some life back into my limbs as I start to struggle, trying to twist from his grasp.

His fingertips dig into the skin of my face and my arm as he sidesteps the pool of blood and pushes my front against the wall.

The puddle is only an inch from my feet as my chest and face are crushed into the brick. A sob fills my mouth, but Alexander's hand is too tight for the sound to escape.

With his body pinning mine to the wall, he works his arm down my torso, catching my leggings and ripping them down my hip.

“Ahh,” I manage a small moan between his fingers even as he pushes me harder with his chest so that he can loosen his belt and undo his pants.

“You’ve been tempting me for far too long, Printcessa,” he spits in my ear as he tugs at his pants.

I look down at the crumpled man near our feet. Did Alexander kill him? Is that what he’s going to do to me?

I try to fight again, but his hips press into me, his cock straining against my ass as he inserts a knee between my legs. I let out another half moan half cry struggling uselessly. I know it’s going to happen.

He’s going to rape me and then what...will he kill me? I look down at the body, crying through the stench of Alexander’s hand.

A gurgling cry fills my ears, and for a moment I think that the man at my feet is still alive. I’m going to listen to him die, my death moans joining his.

But then, Alexander’s body is just gone...

I spin, my brain trying to catch up as night air hits my exposed skin.

But my back collapses against the wall as I just stare. Killian stands just behind Alexander with his hands around the Russian’s throat.

My eyes are wide, my breath coming out in short gasps, but Killian doesn’t look at me. He looks at Alexander, his teeth grit, his lips tight over them. “How dare you

touch her like that.”

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Alexander tugs at Killian's hands, but Killian doesn't seem to notice as he tightens his grip, Alexander is making these gurgling noises. "Stop," he chokes out.

"Mercy? Is that what you're asking for?" he spits in Alexander's ear.

"Yes," Alexander chokes out.

I just stare as Killian drags Alex toward the dumpster, both of them disappearing behind the giant structure.

I hear the crash, the loud sound of something hitting the metal, before Killian appears again. Alone.

He still doesn't look at me, as he bends down over the dead man and reaches for his hair, pulling a bunch from the man's scalp. I let out a little yelp and his eyes finally meet mine. "Hush."

My mouth drops open, my eyes wide. Hush? He takes the hair and walks back behind the dumpster. I see the light of his flashlight on his phone. It must only be minutes but it feels like hours before he reappears.

Distantly, I hear the sound of sirens.

Killian must hear them too. He appears again, coming straight for me. I don't run. Neither my body nor my brain are working at all.

He saved me, but did I just witness him kill a man?

What does that mean for me? He doesn't say a word as he bends down, wrapping his arm around my naked ass and lifting me into his arms. I haven't even pulled my pants up. He doesn't pull them up either as he starts out of the alley and down the street.

He keeps to the shadows, stopping at the slightest noise. I have no idea how long it takes before we reach his car, but when we do, he drops me into the passenger's seat and then tosses a jacket over my lap.

He climbs into the driver's seat and pulls the car out, reversing direction with three quick lefts. He slides into traffic, going exactly the speed limit and I look over at him, the motion of the car turning my stomach. "I think I might be sick."

My body has started to shake, and I can't shrink myself small enough for his jacket to warm me.

Killian looks over at me, his eyes filled with concern. "Can you hold it in until we get back? Five minutes, luv."

"I'll try."

He reaches for me then, his hand cupping my cheek. I close my eyes as the tears start to roll down my face. This touch unlocking the fear and revulsion of the past half hour.

I just want to curl into him, and I find myself leaning over the center tray to press my face into his shoulder. "Killian?"

"Yeah, luv?"

"I'm sorry I left," I sob out, clutching my hands around his bicep. "I'm so sorry."

He slides his hand to my thigh, in a gentle but firm grip. “I’m sorry that motherfucker touched you.”

Me too. “What does this mean?” I ask, my tears soaking the sleeve of his T-shirt.

“Not sure yet,” he answers quietly. “But I can tell you one thing for certain.”

“What’s that?”

“I will not let anyone hurt you, sweetheart. Not ever. You’re my girl to care for. Always.”

I lift my head. “Would you...would you ever hurt me Killian?” He just murdered a man. “I know I asked yesterday but I need a straight answer. A promise.”

I’m pretty sure he’s killed two men since I’ve known him. “I know how important promises are to you.”

A little sob escapes my lips. He didn’t promise, and that scares me. I know his secrets. Does that mean I’m a problem?

His hand slides across my thigh in a soothing motion as he presses his cheek to the top of my head, kissing my temple. “I told you I was your soldier, luv.”

I look up at him then, my brows knitting.

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“If you want to call the police right now, I won’t stop you.”

“You won’t?” I shake my head, trying to understand.

“I would never hurt you, Chloe. Never. It’s not a promise, it’s a vow. You could burn me to the ground, and I’d still give you everything.”

“What does that mean?” But some of my shaking subsides at his calm reassurance. There is not an ounce of hesitation in his body, his words, his demeanor.

“For starters, you need a better place to live. If I die, you become the executor of my will and the beneficiary too. My loft, my petty cash, it’s yours.”

“You...your loft? You’re giving me your loft?” I pull back to stare at him. “What are you talking about?”

“I meant what I said, Chloe. You are my forever. It doesn’t matter if you never speak to me again after tonight. You could curse my name. You could turn me into the police and leave me to rot in prison. You’re imprinted inside me, and I will be yours until my last breath.”

I stare at him, at a loss for words, overwhelmed by the sincerity I hear in his voice. “Killian.” His name comes out broken and teary.

He puts his arms around my shoulders and pulls me into his chest. I wrap my arms around his middle, knowing a few truths.

Killian's feelings, in some ways, are far purer than mine. His dedication and commitment have been there, I just couldn't see past my own issues.

I rub my nose in his side. "You're my forever too."

"Don't say that...not yet."

I look up at him, my brows knitted in confusion. We've reached the garage under his building, and he pulls in, parking the car in his usual spot.

He slides out of the SUV and comes around to the other side to open my door. I hesitate for a second, nothing but tatters of clothes on my bottom half, but Killian holds out his arms to me. I slide into them as he lifts me out and then wraps his coat around my waist, before lifting me off the ground again.

I burrow into him as we make our way to the elevator and then up to the loft.

Once we're in his place, he heads straight for the bedroom, not setting me down until we're in the bathroom.

Finally lowering me to my feet, he turns to the tub, opening the taps. I watch as the water fills the tub, and I let out a sigh. Soaking in the tub would make me feel a million times better.

My eyes meet Killian's as he steps toward me again. He pulls off the tattered leggings and then my tank top, handing me into the tub. I sink down into the hot water, a groan escaping my lips, it feels so good.

He starts shucking off his clothes too and lowers himself down in the other end of the tub. Shutting off the taps, his legs tangle with mine under the water.

I rest my head on the lip of the tub, letting my eyes slide closed. “I would never go to the police.”

“Chloe.”

“First, I don’t trust them.”

“Stepfather,” he says his voice dropping so low, it would frighten me if it were any other man.

“Yeah,” I open my eyes again to meet his. “If I had the chance, I think I could do it. I could put his head in a bucket of water and...”

Killian shakes his head. “Some are born into violence, others are made. You are not the first, I would never want you to become the latter. That’s my job.”

“But some things in life hurt so much, they need to be exorcised.” The way Alexander tried to hurt me was awful. And maybe I should be disturbed by what I know Killian did to him in return, but I’m not. Alexander killed that other man first, and he would have killed me too. I know it. Knowing that he’s dead now, I feel safer.

Killian’s eyes hold a darkness that makes my breath catch as he shakes his head again. “I need you to understand.”

I feel the emotion that bunches his muscles. I reach out to touch his knee. “Understand what?”

“I want to tell you about my past.”

CHAPTERTWENTY-FOUR

Killian

I see Chloe's eyes go wide.

She saw a piece of me today, a really dark one, and she's still here, still soaking in a tub with me.

It gives me a bit of hope that what I'm about to tell her won't make her run in fear.

I let out a long breath, scrubbing my hands over my face. I've never told a soul what I'm about to share and I can't believe I'm actually going to put this out in the world and in someone else's hands.

But Chloe told me she wanted the truth, and I'll give it to her.

I know it might drive her away.

I wouldn't even blame her. But it's time for the honesty that I know she craves and then it will all be out. No more secrets. "I wasn't always like this. In fact, my mother used to say that I was the happiest of her children."

Chloe's lips part as she leans closer. "I can see that. There is something so clean about your feelings."

Clean. It's a word no one ever associates with me. It makes my chest tight as I reach for her hand.

She slips her small fingers into mine. Her wide green eyes look even brighter in the overhead light of the bathroom, her cheeks flushing from the heat of the water making her eyes sparkle even more.

I don't want to scare her anymore tonight, but I also want all the shit out there. "I'm not clean, Chloe. I'm dirty as fuck."

She grimaces. "For killing a man who was going to kill me? I don't think so."

I shake my head. "You don't know the shit I've done and I'm never telling you. It's my burden to bear. But I want you to understand..." I break again. This is harder than I thought. I've been keeping the words in for so long, it's like they're lodged in my chest. Buried so deep, I can't reach them.

She untangles her legs and then moves through the water, settling her back against my front, her body cradled against mine. I wrap my arms around her, resting my cheek on the top of her head. "This is nicer, you're right."

Having her body pressed against mine, I feel my muscles relax. And this way, when I say the words, I don't have to see her face.

Which frightens me as much as it comforts.

The fear I've experienced since Chloe has come into my life is a funny thing. I haven't cared about death or pain for the longest time, and now I do.

I'm not afraid of my feelings for her. But now, I am always worried about her safety. Her wellbeing. If something happens to me...

I kiss the top of her head, my eyes closing as I breathe in the scent of her hair.

“You can tell me, Killian.”

I draw in a deep breath, my hands spreading out on her arms.

“My dad wasn’t around much when we were young. First, there were multiple estates. My mother mostly stayed in one so that we had a stable upbringing, but my father travelled a lot. They said it was for property management, but I learned later...” I draw in another breath, just taking a beat.

She threads her fingers through mine. “Keep going.”

“I learned that he was a party boy. Drugs. Women. The works... Because we were mostly raised by our mother, we saw her pain, and we don’t talk about it, but I think all of us have been reluctant to start serious relationships after watching theirs.”

She nods, remaining quiet as I collect my thoughts again. I appreciate her not pushing.

“When I was maybe ten, my father came home from a long jag away. He looked thin, pale, bloated. He drank all the time and despite being home, the house mostly went on without him except for his random drunken rages that disrupted everything. I’m the second youngest, Rush the youngest, so my older brothers shielded me from a lot of that. I do remember Tris and Gris pinning him to the floor once when he went after my mother.”

She shudders in my arms, making me tighten my grip. “Is this too much for you after tonight?”

“No,” she shakes her head, pulling my arms even tighter. “I’ve seen my mom get beat up on more than one occasion. It’s always awful.”

There is so much that Chloe understands that most people wouldn't. I rub my cheek over the top her head wanting to be even closer to her.

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“One night he was really drunk, I guess. I was outside after dark, playing in the walled garden, when he stumbled out. That’s when he grabbed me and pulled my face an inch from his face...”

I stop again, the words causing a lump in my chest, lodged once again.

Being with Chloe has loosened so many emotions I thought I’d dammed up tight and I can feel the fear I’d experienced that night pulse through me.

The rancid smell of his breath, the tight grip of his hand. I must go rigid because Chloe turns around, running a soothing hand over my jaw. “It’s all right.”

Is she comforting me? I don’t spend much time with my mother, shut myself off from her a long time ago. I’ve forgotten what female comfort feels like and I sink into the feeling now.

“He shook me and then he told me that I was a curse on our family. A disgusting vile creature who caused him and my mother nothing but pain. That it was my fault he was never home, he couldn’t even look at me, I was so repulsive.”

“Killian,” Chloe gasps, flipping in the tub so that her front is pressed to mine. Her arms wrap around my neck, her face only inches from mine. “Why would he say that to you?” Her incredulity helps. My arms, wrap around her, as I drop my forehead to hers, keeping my eyes closed, emotion making my throat tight.

“He said...” I draw in a jagged breath, my eyes closing. “That my mother was raped. And that I...”

Her lips press to mine, her arms tightening around my neck. I've told her the worst of it. He used words I didn't even understand at the time. Ones like sadist and psychotic. I came to understand them later.

For a long time, Chloe just holds me, kissing my lips over and over with small, firm presses of her lips. Maybe she doesn't yet understand the full implication of my words. I was made from violence, and it lives in my blood and in my soul.

Then again, perhaps my violent nature is the very thing that will see her through. I kiss her back, just needing the comfort that her arms and lips provide.

I expected revulsion or distance.

I never expected this kind of sweet, sweet acceptance. It takes the connection I already felt for Chloe and amplifies it, makes it deeper, stronger.

The water is starting to cool, and I feel her shiver against the warmth of my skin. In a second, I've got the tap on, adding more hot water. Then I grab the soap and start soaping up her skin.

I don't want any trace of Alexander on her body. When I'm done with the bath, I lift her out of the bath and carry her to the shower. "We're going to wash our hair. Give ourselves another scrub."

I would do anything to protect Chloe, bathing her is the least of it. We don't talk as she washes out her blonde hair and I do the same. But as we get out of the shower, and I wrap her in a fluffy white towel, she gives me a sideways glance. "What does your mother say about all of this?"

I stare at her, probably looking confused. "Why would I have told my mother? I don't talk to my mother about anything. Especially not this."

Her own features draw into a frown. She shakes her head. “But what if he...why don’t you talk to her at all?”

“Could you imagine raising a child like that? What it must have taken? I refuse to cause her anymore pain, and so I take her burden away by keeping to myself.”

Chloe’s mouth opens and then closes as her lips twitch. “Did she love you as a child?”

“I guess. She treated me just like she did my other brothers.” I feel that tightness in my chest like something isn’t right.

“Does she try to talk to you now?” Chloe doesn’t look like she’s judging but she does seem concerned.

The answer is yes. Even after all this time. But I keep my distance because why should she have to love me? It isn’t fair to her.

Chloe searches my face, seeing the answer. “If she didn’t want you, she wouldn’t try, Killian. That’s a choice she can make for herself.”

Chloe turns toward the door then, taking the towel off her body to wrap up her wet hair. The sight of her naked ass makes my cock twitch, but I ignore the sensation. Thinking about everything else we’ve discussed.

More than I want to be inside Chloe, I just want to hold her close, feel her body against mine and know that I am loved.

She comes back in the bathroom, and I realized I haven’t moved since she left. She’s wearing my T-shirt as she comes over to me again, wrapping her arms around my neck. “You all right?”

“I’m good. Better than I thought.” And then I kiss her. Because I feel lighter. And I know that beyond just giving Chloe my heart forever, I’m going to give her my body. My soul. Everything I do will be for her.

Her hands thread into my wet hair, clinging to me as I brush my mouth across hers. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she says against my lips.

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I finally let her go, moving to the bedroom to pull on joggers. That's when she fires up the blow dryer.

I've no more than slapped the elastic low on my hips when a loud knock sounds on my door.

Fuck.

I enter the living room. "Who the fuck is it?"

"Tris," my brother barks back. "Open the damn door."

I stomp over, a scowl surely pulling at every feature of my face. I'm wrung out and the last thing I want to do is spar with Triston. I throw open the door, snarling. "I don't just show up at your fucking house, you know."

"I don't go around killing people I was specifically told not to touch."

I open the door wider. Clearly this is a now problem. "Chloe will be blow drying her hair for the next ten minutes. That's how long you've got."

He steps in as I close the door behind me. "Does she know you killed Preston?"

"Not specifically."

"Alexander?"

I'm not much for lying so I say nothing. Triston starts spitting. "Fuck." He scrubs his hand down his face. "What have you done?"

"He tried to rape her."

"So? She's a fucking waitress you've known for a few days."

I'm on him before he can even respond, taking him to the ground and dropping on top of him. I see the fear flash in his eyes, but I don't back down. My face right in his, I spit, "Chloe is here to stay. You'll treat her like you do Arabella or we're going to have a real problem."

"Jesus, Killian," he growls back, but he's calmer. "Get off me."

I ease back but not totally up. "Ask Gris what he'd do if someone touched Arabella like that."

"Arabella is his fiancée."

Marriage. Interesting. "I just told you. Chloe is here to stay."

"You just met her."

"Do I usually fuck around with women? Why would I be with her if I'm not serious? That's for you, Triston. I chose Chloe because she's the one."

Triston's eyes close. "Mason told you not to touch Alexander. Do you know how much money rides on the Kincaids' benevolence?"

"We've got money." I lift off him. "I don't give a shit."

“I give a shit,” he pulls himself up. “I’ve worked for months on this deal.”

“Well, then, rest assured. Alexander killed Antonelli Vendetti so...Mason is getting his wish. Italians and Russians divided, because I made it look like Antonelli killed Alexander back.”

Triston smiles, his eyes lighting. “Why didn’t you say so.”

“I just fucking did.” I hear the blow dryer shut off. “Now get the fuck out.”

Triston hesitates, his mouth twitching with indecision before he finally speaks. “Killian, I know you’re attached. But what Chloe knows is a problem.”

“It isn’t.”

“It is.” My brother insists.

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I step closer, my finger coming right in his face. “I know my value, Triston. I’m not just the dirty man. Your deals go through because of my intel. I am the key to your money machine.”

I see him wince and I know he knows I’m right. “But if she talks...”

“She won’t.”

“She might. And if she does, you’ll have to be prepared?—”

I bump my chest into his. “Don’t make me fucking choose, Triston. You won’t like what happens next.”

His nostrils flare, his lips thinning, before he steps around me. “You’d choose pussy over your own family?”

I swing but he’s ready and he blocks my punch.

“You’re not listening. She is my family. And if anyone, and I mean anyone, tries to hurt her, the consequences are going to send the whole of Vegas crashing down.”

A frustrated rumble rips from his mouth before he pivots toward the door, stomping toward it. He slams it shut as he leaves.

For a moment I stare at the door saying a lot of really nasty words under my breath. But that’s when I hear it...the whirl of helicopter blades.

I turn my head, looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows of the loft when the copter comes into view.

Helicopters are everywhere in Vegas, taking tourists on scenic aerial tours of the city. But this one drops down right in front of my windows.

And then it turns to the side, a gunman standing in the open door of the bird. My heart slows as my gaze locks with the gunman.

I only have one second to jump behind the island before he opens fire.

CHAPTERTWENTY-FIVE

Killian

The shattering of glass fills the loft as bullets strike all over the room. I watch drywall explode on the far wall, hit the cabinets, splinter the tile backsplash. All I can do is wait and hope I don't get hit.

I hear Chloe's scream and I let out a feral roar. If anything happens to her, I will tear Vegas apart brick by fucking brick until I've laid the entire place to waste.

Any man responsible will suffer the worst and most heinous death imaginable.

My door flies open and Tris appears, a pistol in his hand as he crouches low, he returns fire.

I can't see if he hits anyone or even the helicopter, but the machine gun firing ceases, the helicopter taking off into the sky.

I don't wait. Pushing up, I sprint through the kitchen and down the hall, throwing

open the bedroom door.

“Chloe!” I yell into the silence. The windows are unbroken, but I realize I’m holding my breath when she stands from the other side of the bed.

“Killian,” she sobs, her hands over her red face.

Closing the distance between us, I pull her into my embrace. Her arms and legs wind around me, her face burrowing into my shoulder as she lets out a wailing sob. Her fingers thread into my hair, her body heaving.

I hear the crunching of Tris’s footsteps. They stop in the door. Chloe’s still in just my shirt. I look over my shoulder to glare at my brother as she begins to shake uncontrollably. “Get me a blanket,” I snap at my brother.

He does as I command, pulling the comforter off the bed and spreading it over Chloe’s back himself.

“Sweetheart,” I murmur. “It’s all right.”

“Are-are you h-hurt?” she stutters out.

“No. I’m fine.”

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That's when she lifts up her head. "Triston? Are you o-okay?"

A muscle in his cheek twitches, the only indicator he's struggling. "I'm just fine. You?"

"I...I..." she looks at me then, her eyes filled with so much anguish, they fucking slay me. "Please tell me this wasn't my fault."

"Of course, it's not your fault, sweetheart," I grit out through clenched teeth.

"But I was so stupid going to work by myself tonight. You told me not to and I didn't listen. I?—"

It's Triston who answers, "This isn't your fault, Chloe. Any of it."

She collapses on my chest again, burrowing into me. I glare at my brother. I hope he's reading my message.

I see his slight wince. Carrying Chloe to the bureau, I pull out pants for her to put on. It's not the smoothest move while holding her, but I manage. Then I carry her to the bathroom door.

"Sweetheart. Put these on. I'm going to pack a bag for us while you dress. Okay?"

She wobbles on her legs but manages a nod before she disappears into the bathroom.

As soon as the door closes, I spin back around, glaring at Triston. "Tell me this

wasn't you."

"Of course it wasn't me," he snaps. "You're my fucking brother."

I scrub a hand down my face, trying to think. Chloe clouds my judgment, because she brings out my emotional side, but I start tucking my feelings away.

"She doesn't know anything, does she?"

"No," I spit, starting for the closet to grab a bag. "Of course not. I know my fucking job. I always have."

Triston lets out a long breath. "I should have trusted that. And you."

"Yeah. You should have. And you can trust in this. Chloe is my forever. Though, if she were thinking clearly, she ought to run far away from all of us."

"Would she go to the cops?"

"She hates cops. But even if she did, she knows nothing of the company or what we do. Only of what I did tonight. It would be my cross to bear, no one else's."

"But that could mean that she could rat?—"

"That's my risk to take, Triston. And even if she does, she gets all my petty cash and my personal real estate."

Triston looks at me like I'm crazy. Like I'm insane. As fucking usual. But I don't care. Chloe comes out of the bathroom in her pants and darts back into my arms. It's like she would crawl into my skin if I let her.

I pick her up and put her on my hip, throwing shit from drawers one-handed into the duffel.

Triston lets out a long breath of air. “Let me do that.”

“Hurry,” I say, going to the bathroom to collect toothbrushes and shampoo, carrying Chloe with me.

We’re ready in the next five minutes. I’ve got clothes, cash, and enough personal items to get us through for a while.

“Can you walk?” I ask Chloe.

“Yes,” she answers, as I set her on her feet.

“We’re going to have to disappear for a bit,” I say to her, wincing. She’s got school. Work. I know she’s been afraid to lean too heavily on me.

But as her green eyes meet mine, I watch a tear slip down her cheek. “Just don’t leave me, Killian. Please.”

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I hear the begging. “I said forever, Chloe. I’m never leaving you.”

“Promise?”

Her hand is squeezing mine, her eyes pleading. “I promise. I’m your monster remember?”

“And you’ll keep all the other monsters away?” she whispers. But I know Triston hears it.

I fucking brought the monsters right to the door tonight. “Baby, I’m going to slay every one of them. And that is a promise.”

She burrows into me again, her body folding so small, she kills me as I kiss the top of her head. “We’ve got to go.”

“Where?”

I’ve got a few safe houses in this city. Places with no name and no record. We’re going to one of those.

“You can take Mason up on his offer,” Triston offers.

I scowl at him. For all I know, Mason just tried to kill me. I wouldn’t put it past him. His mouth twitches and I think he understands.

“You can get me on the burner if you need me,” I tell him and then I sit Chloe on the

bed, slipping a pair of sneakers on her feet. “Call our mother and tell her I love her, would you?”

“You want me to call mum?” Triston asks, his eyes bugging out.

“Yeah.” I can’t go into why, but I hope she understands.

Triston’s mouth is opening and closing even as I head for the stairwell. I won’t use the main entrance, and I won’t take my car.

We’re disappearing into the shadows.

CHAPTERTWENTY-SIX

Triston

I watchmy brother disappear into the stairwell and I have this feeling like I might never see him again.

And it would be my fucking fault.

I never take Killian seriously enough. It’s the simplicity of his intentions or the way he just says what he thinks without lifting his head and being aware of his surroundings.

But tonight, I fucked it up. Because if there is one thing I know about Killian, it is that when he sets a course, nothing alters it.

And he knows how to move without being seen. He’s able to do shit I could never do. And I pushed him away with all that shit I just said about Chloe. How I didn’t trust him or his feelings.

So instead of trusting in me, he's going to fade into the dark and I might never find him.

Something happened when we were kids that totally changed him. One day he was happy Killian. The happiest kid you've ever met, and the next, he went dark. I'm six years older than him and I watched his change. I don't even know what caused it. He never said, the very fact that a ten-year-old never shared what happened is fucking crazy.

But I should know that Killian is iron. Unbendable. Unshakable.

And then there is Chloe. If I'd forgotten how set Killian can become, what I didn't understand is that Chloe returns every one of Killian's feelings. There is no gray.

I've only watched one other woman in a crisis cling to her man. Gris's fiancé Arabella wrapped herself around Gris like her life depended on it. It did. But Gris didn't appear burdened. Not at all.

He rose like a soldier. No. Like a god of war, fighting for his woman with every muscle in his body.

I wonder what it would be like to feel like that. To have a woman you wished to be your strongest self for.

I push that thought away. I'm not that kind of man.

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I didn't think Killian was either. My mistake because Killian has decided that Chloe is the woman he wants to fight for and if he thinks I'm Chloe's enemy, there isn't anything he won't do, any length he won't go.

Here is the thing, Mason can outmaneuver us all in business. He's smart and savvy and even more motivated to conquer the world now that he's married.

But Killian, with his disregard of the rules, his emotional simplicity, and his ability to stay in the shadows, he could take Mason down with a single stroke of his hand. The Kincaids topple, just like that.

I've always known that Killian is the most dangerous of us all. And what he needs right now is my allegiance. I get it.

I leave his bedroom and cross the living room, shaking my head at the damage. It's insane. Glass is everywhere, holes littering the walls, cabinets, and tile.

In the corner stands Chloe's easel. The painting is turned away from me, but I can see that the right side of the canvas now has six or seven holes. Tentatively I move toward it, swallowing as I grab the canvas and turn the painting around.

I suck in a deep gulp of air at the sight. It's a painting of Killian, and it steals my breath. Did I call Gris the god of war? In this piece Killian is God himself, holding within him the entire universe, his strength keeping it all together.

It's beautiful and powerful, and if I had any doubt that Chloe returned Killian's feelings, I can't deny what I see. Killian isn't just her world, he's her universe, her

God.

This ache hits me square in the chest and I realize...I'm jealous.

No woman has ever looked at me the way she does him.

I grab the painting and follow Killian and Chloe down the stairs. I know they're long gone. I shouldn't have dallied in the apartment so long, for all I know, whoever attacked has a follow-up coming.

But I make it down the stairs and out to my car. Revving the engine, I peel out of the garage, heading home.

On the way, I do as Killian asked, and I call our mother.

It's three in the morning in Derbyshire, England but she still picks up. "Triston?"

"Did I wake you, mum?"

"No. Couldn't sleep. But the fact you're calling so late worries me. What's wrong?"

I don't even pretend it's nothing. I'm thirty-six years old, I don't make a habit of calling my mother unless it's a family matter. "It's Killian."

I hear her gasp. "Tell me he's alive."

"He's alive," I grimace. "It's worse than death. He's fallen in love."

"Triston Thadius Smith, don't you dare joke like that. You nearly gave me a heart attack."

Middle name. Fuck. “I’m not joking. He’s...he’s gone off the deep end.”

“How deep?”

“Like quit the whole family. Wage war on us to protect her.”

“You’d better explain.”

I do. All of it. From my speculations about his change in personality, to how he met Chloe, to how she seems to return his feelings, and how I think I made it worse. She listens silently, the way mothers do, and then when it’s all out, she whispers into the phone. “Who attacked?”

“I think the Russians.”

“And Mason?”

“It’s possible, but I doubt it. Gris is his brother-in-law, and he mostly operates on the right side of the law. I’ve only seen him step over the line when his family was under direct attack and Killian does not pose that threat. Yet. But honestly...” I don’t want to say it. Killian knows how to cut off the head of a snake. He’ll do just that if he’s pushed.

“Mmm,” she says, clearly considering. We get all of our savvy from our mother, so I give her the space she needs to work it out. “Call Mason. But first make sure you’re not being followed.”

“All right.”

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“I need the number to Killian’s burner.”

“You know I can’t.”

“Don’t argue with your mother. If you want Killian back in the fold, you’ll do as I say.”

I sigh. I’m the head of a global company approaching its first billion in earnings. And I still have to listen to my mother. “Fine.”

“Should I send your brother?”

She’s talking about our eldest brother, Lord Winston Smith IV, heir to the Duke of Grandmont. He lives in England with her. That is not to say he’s a mama’s boy. If anything, he keeps our mother at a very healthy distance. He does what he wants, and she moves pieces to support his political career.

“No. I am more than capable.”

“Don’t lose Killian, Tris.” Her voice holds a hardness I’ve never heard. “I want to find my lost son again, not watch him slip further away.”

“I’ll do my best.” I don’t make promises I’m not sure I can keep. I hear her dissatisfaction as she hangs up the phone.

I heed her command to make certain I’m not being followed before I pick up the phone and call Mason. I’m not going home. Not yet.

He picks up on the second ring. “Hello?”

“It’s me. We need to meet. Somewhere secure.”

He pauses and I look at the clock. It’s approaching ten.

“I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t an emergency.”

“Your brother dive into the deep end?”

“In person,” I demand, my tone clipped. If I’m going to succeed, my first job is to manage Mason Kincaid. I will not let him know the depth of the threat that Killian poses. Mason might put a target on my brother’s back if he feels threatened.

So I need to make it clear that Killian’s actions are to our advantage.

With a sigh, he texts me an address. I’m there in five minutes, the locked metal gates swinging open for me, though I see no guard. It’s honestly impressive.

I pull into the garage, which is completely empty, and wait. But a minute later, another car arrives. It’s not Mason who gets out, however, it’s Jake Kincaid.

Am I walking into an ambush? I step out of the car, squaring off as Jake approaches. He raises both hands. “I come in peace.”

“Mason didn’t tell me you’d be here.”

“Sorry.” He shrugs off his jacket and turns in a circle, showing me he’s not armed. “I really like your brother, Killian. I want him...”

“What?”

“I want him to join me on the security front. I’ve got loads of technological expertise but he’s miles ahead of me on recon. He sees things, knows things I could only dream of discovering. Together...”

I blink in surprise. I didn’t expect an ally, but it makes my job much easier. “You came here to advocate for Killian.”

“I called Mason just before you. I...” He winces. “I have cameras near Killian’s home. I saw the helicopter and the shooting and was alerting Mason when you called.”

My hands clench. Killian was partially right. The Kincaids are not completely friends if they’ve been spying on us, and I’ve been a fool not to trust my brother more.

Another car arrives, Mason steps out from the backseat. My jaw is set in a hard line as I glare.

But another car is entering the garage. One I immediately recognize as my brother Gris. Mason has stopped. “I knew you would have reservations when Jake told you about the cameras. Gris is here in a show of faith.”

“Did you send that helicopter?”

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It's Mason's turn to kill me with his eyes. "If I wanted Killian dead, I would never be so garish or so stupid."

Fair.

Gris gets out of his car approaching in long strides. "What the fuck is going on?"

The four of us stand in a loose circle. "Someone attempted to kill Killian this evening. He's gone underground with Chloe."

"Underground?" Mason asks.

"We won't find him," Gris says with a shrug. "Unless he wants to be found. He plans for this kind of shit like you would not believe."

"We don't need to." Mason rubs the back of his neck. "I got a text from Dimitri Ivanov this evening. It had footage of Killian killing Alexander. The helicopter was retaliation."

"Killing Alexander?" Gris's gaze slashes to me. "What the fuck is he talking about?"

"Chloe went to the bar before hours to quit. Alexander tried to rape her."

Silence follows my words as each man begins to understand. Every one of them has fallen in love, married. If a man put his hand on one of their wives....

"Would Killian take out the entire Russian Bratva?" Mason asks.

I don't like the question. Even I know that killing takes a toll on Killian, even though he pretends it doesn't. "He's not a fucking assassin."

Gris meets my eyes, and he gives the briefest jerk of his chin. "We're sticking to the plan. Meet with the Russians. Put them on notice."

"Did the video happen to show that Alexander had already killed a Vendetti?"

Mason's eyes widen in surprise, a smile spreading on his lips. "So they're already falling out on their own. This is excellent news."

"Gris is right," Jake adds. "We have the meeting. Sell Killian's actions as that of a man in love who lost his temper over his lady. Pretend we're throwing the Russians a bone by allowing them a second casino in the tunnel deal as an apology."

We're all nodding.

But I add, "We should have Killian attend."

"Why?" Gris asks.

"I agree," Mason says before I answer. "And let him be as pissed as he wants to be. They should fear him and what he'll do to them if they don't fall in line."

I don't answer. Because while I agree with Mason, I have no idea if I can convince Killian to come and if I'll be able to control him if he does.

CHAPTERTWENTY-SEVEN

Chloe

We walk for what feels like hours. We zig and zag down streets and alleys, skulking through shadows, until I have no idea where we are.

Finally, we stop in the doorway of a building and Killian pulls out a key. My eyes go wide as he unlocks the door, and we step inside. He softly closes it behind us, turning a deadbolt. We walk up two flights of stairs, before he unlocks another door.

Stepping inside, he flicks on a single light, and I gasp. We're in an apartment. A small kitchen sits to the left, a cozy living room with a couch and two chairs to the right.

"Where are we?" I ask, peeking into a doorway that leads into a small but very clean bathroom.

"My apartment."

I turn to stare at him. "But weren't we at your loft apartment already?"

"I have five," he answers like that is a completely normal response.

“Are all of them furnished?”

“Of course.” He flips on the bathroom light for me, kissing my forehead. “This is the only bathroom in the place. You go first.”

I stare at him, so many questions circling in my brain. But I really need to pee and I’m exhausted.

So I close the door and go to the bathroom.

When I come out, he’s got the stove on, dumping the contents of an envelope inside. “What is that?”

“Food,” he answers. “It’s not great, but each of these places is equipped with a two-month supply of freeze-dried provisions.”

That’s when it hits me. Killian is prepared for this. He knew he might have to disappear at some point.

And now I’ve disappeared with him.

I cross over to the couch and sink down into the cushions, the weight of what’s happening fully sinking in.

We’re hiding. Someone tried to kill us tonight. Well, technically, first someone tried to kill me and then someone tried to kill Killian. An almost hysterical laugh breaks from my lips.

He stops stirring. “Chloe.”

I wave my hand, like I’m waving him off. “I’m all right. I just realized...”

“What?”

“I’m not going to class tomorrow, am I? And I’m not going to my new job either.” My chest is getting tight. Getting my degree has been the entire purpose of my life the last three years. It was my path out of the past and into the future.

I date one guy for a week...

This time, I don’t laugh, I choke on a sob.

He turns off the stove. “Sweetheart.”

I know this isn’t Killian’s fault. Alexander was harassing me before I’d even spoken to Killian. If he hadn’t taken an interest, I’d be...I’d be dead right now. Alexander would have killed me, and Killian is a man I can trust.

But also...maybe I was just fooling myself that I could be different from my mother. I was always going to succumb to chaos. “I’m no better than her.”

“Who?”

“My mother.” My voice cracks in the middle.

“That isn’t true.” Crossing the room, he squats in front of me. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?”

“This is my fault. I dragged you into this.” I hear the pain in his voice. “I’m a black hole, Chloe, and I’ve sucked you into the dark void with me.”

His words calm my racing thoughts. Killian isn’t a black hole. He isn’t dark, no matter what he’s come to believe. “It’s not true.”

“It is.” He stands up scrubbing his hands over his face. “I’ll send you away so that you can have a real life. I’ll?—”

“Stop.” I stand too, taking his hands away from his face and holding them in mine. “You’re not the problem, Killian. You never have been.”

He stares at me. “You don’t know...”

“I do. You’re wrong about yourself, I can see it. Feel it. And maybe that means, if you’re wrong about yourself, I’m wrong about me.”

He looks into my eyes for what seems like an eternity but might only be a few minutes before he’s pulling me into his arms. His lips come down over mine in a kiss that claims.

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I wrap my arms around his neck drawing him closer. When he lifts his head, he looks more vulnerable than I've ever seen him. "I'm going to make it right."

I shake my head. "That's not what I said."

"I know. But I'm still making that promise. You deserve all the beautiful things in life, Chloe. I'll give them to you."

He lets me go then, returning to the stove. And though I'm more tired than hungry, I eat when he commands, just because I know it will make him feel better.

When we're done, he takes my hand and leads me through the other door, which leads into a bedroom. This place doesn't boast the giant bed that he has in the loft but it's a nice, soft looking queen, and I sigh at the idea of crawling under the covers.

He strips off my clothes and then I do just that, pulling the covers over my body. He brushes a hand through my hair.

"Aren't you coming?"

Leaning down, he kisses my forehead. "Soon."

"Where are you going?" I can hear the fear in my voice.

He runs a hand through my hair. "I'll be right in the kitchen where you can find me anytime you need. I'll just be on the phone. You'll be able to hear me the whole time."

I nod, feeling better, even as my eyes slide closed. I do hear him, the deep thrum of his baritone voice for about two minutes, and then I'm sound asleep.

I have no idea how much time passes but I wake when his weight sinks into the bed next to me. "Killian?"

"It's me, baby." He pulls me close, his hand spreading out on my belly as he nuzzles into my neck.

"What time is it?"

"Late," he answers sounding tired.

I'm tempted to ask him what he's been doing, but I know he won't tell me. It's part of how he protects me. So instead, I roll over, pressing my front to his. He's naked too, and I tangle our legs together as I kiss him.

His hungry lips devour mine as he grabs my ass in one of his hands, squeezing the flesh as he pulls me against his hard cock.

That first night, the tight squeeze of his hand might have frightened me. But not tonight.

I know that Killian would never hurt me. In fact, he'd move mountains to keep me safe. And whenever I've asked him to soften his behavior to accommodate my past, my fears, he's acquiesced without a word of complaint.

This is a man who loves me. A man I can trust.

And I know what I want to give him. It's for me too. It's my way of putting my past behind me.

Which is why I untangle my legs and start kissing over his jaw, down his neck and across his chest.

He hisses when I lick his nipples, but I keep going, kissing over the ridges of his abs until his cock bumps my chin.

We both laugh as I pull my chin tighter to my chest so that I can lick the tip.

He sucks in a breath, his hand settling on my shoulder, his fingers twitching against my skin.

I take the head between my lips, suckling before I draw him deeper, sinking down his thick length. I gag a bit, forgetting just how full he makes a girl's mouth. His fingers tighten as he pulls me away.

I let him guide me off his cock as I reach my arm around my neck to gather all my hair over one shoulder.

“Killian?” I look up his body, my eyes locking on his as I give him another lick.

“I want to fuck you.”

I shake my head. “Take my hair.”

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His brows draw together. “No. I’m not?—”

“We’re putting our pasts behind us one day at a time. Do it.”

He gathers the strands in his hand, holding them loosely as I sink back down, swallowing his cock.

He lets out a low groan, his fingers tightening in my hair. This time, though, it doesn’t scare me.

It makes me feel...powerful. I swallow him all the way down until he hits the back of my throat.

He’s cursing and spitting as I slowly come up, popping off the end before I sink back down.

I work him slowly. I don’t know why, other than slow feels like love. His hips strain off the bed, his hand so tight in my hair, he’s guiding my movements.

Tears start to leak from my eyes, but I keep my movements deliberate, drawing out his pleasure.

His thighs tremble, his fingers so tightly wound in my hair, that I can’t help but heed when he pulls me off his cock. “Chloe.”

I start to protest. I’m finishing this...

But he's tapping my shoulder. "Bring your pussy up here. I want you on my face."

What can I say? The man has a way with words. I twist around, laying on top of him so that I can sink my mouth back down his cock even as he smacks my ass and then dives in, licking my already-aching pussy.

A jolt of pleasure courses through me. I forget to take him in as I arch, letting out a cry. He squeezes my ass cheeks together, lapping until I'm panting.

That's when I sink back down, swallowing him all the way down.

He thrusts up, our bodies moving together as we suck and lap. I'd moan but my mouth is too full. I finally have to break off, letting out a high-pitched cry as I come undone, an orgasm ripping through me.

He gives me a few seconds and then he's pushing my head back down. "I can't wait," he grits out.

Still pulsing from the aftereffects of the orgasm, I slide all the way down his cock, filling my mouth.

He cums with a roar, his hot seed shooting down my throat.

I hold until he's done, finally pull up and then collapse on top of him.

"Christ," he groans. He's limp under me. Have I wrecked him? Good.

Scooting to one side, I right myself so that my head rests on his shoulder, my body pressed to his side. He's already asleep, but his arm still comes around me, drawing me closer. I fall back to sleep too.

I have no idea what tomorrow will bring. But tonight, I'm safe in his arms.

CHAPTERTWENTY-EIGHT

Killian

I wake with Chloe's body snug against mine, soft in sleep. I don't move because I don't want to wake her. Last night while she slept, I bought her a license, passport, credit cards, the works, under a new name.

If shit is going sideways, I need to know that she'll be safe.

Gently, I brush a kiss over her temple, keeping my body relaxed. I know that today is going to be the day that sends us careening into one direction or another.

A future together here in Vegas, or a future for her without me. I just want to delay the start, soak in the feel of her skin, her smell.

I feel my heart beating in my chest. I'm sure it's been there the whole time, pumping life through my veins, but the sound is new to my ears. Her hand is on my stomach, and I cover it with mine, sliding it up my body until it's resting over my heart. I need Chloe to know that it beats for her and her alone.

The movement makes her stir and I still again, rewarded when she falls back to sleep.

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Softly I begin to whisper promises about the future I'm going to give her. I've already wired millions into an offshore account. If I'm not around, there is no way Chloe is waiting tables and making herself more vulnerable to filthy men.

The buzzing of my phone draws my attention. It's my regular phone, Triston's name appears on the screen. I don't pick up.

But Chloe still stirs. Her head lifts and her sleepy eyes open. "Who is it?"

"No one."

She cranes her neck. "Triston is no one?"

"Right now, he is," I return tightening my arms around her. She has no idea that Triston called her a problem, that he intimidated I ought to make that problem disappear. I told him not to make me choose, but the truth is, I already have.

My phone stops ringing and the burner starts. "Pick up," Chloe murmurs.

"My family is not our biggest supporters," I rumble back.

"Of course they aren't." She burrows into me. "We've known each other for less than a week, I witnessed you commit murder. They don't know who I am or what I'm about. And they are worried about you." She lifts her head then, her eyes meeting mine. "I wish I had family like that. No one has ever cared about me enough to worry until you."

My teeth grit together because I see her fucking point. They are trying to protect me even if they are mostly just pissing me off.

The burner stops and then starts again. This time, I pick up. “What?”

“Good morning,” Triston replies, sounding like the smooth fuck he is. “Get any sleep?”

“Like a baby,” I answer, rising from the bed. I’m naked, not that I care, as I open the bedroom door and head out into the kitchen.

Chloe doesn’t follow, I know she knows I need a bit of privacy.

“Jesus, Killian,” Triston rumbles. “Yesterday had to bother you.”

“Of course it bothered me,” I bite back. “That’s the thing about having a soft woman in your bed. She reminds you of what you’re fighting for.”

Triston is silent for several seconds. “Killian.”

There is a different tone in his voice. It concedes. Maybe even asks...

“What?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t trust you.”

I pull the phone from my ear, staring at it. “Are you having me killed today?”

“What the hell? Why would you ask that?”

“Because you’re acting fucking weird.” I lower my voice, which has been rising with

each word. “And because we both know you think I’m a problem and so does Mason Kincaid.”

Triston lets out a long breath. “I don’t think you’re a problem, Killian. In fact, I think you’ve been seeing several people and events with a lot more clarity than I have. This is me admitting I’m wrong and you’re right, just to be clear.”

Triston never admits he’s wrong. This entire interaction is just off. “Now I know you’re planning something.”

“I’m not...” He lets out a frustrated breath. “I spoke with mum.”

“Yeah?” my stomach sinks.

“She said if anything happens to you, she’ll disown me.” Triston scratches at the stubble on his jaw, I hear it through the phone. “And then I spoke with Mason, and I realized that you were right not to trust him. He’s had cameras on our houses this entire time.”

I hear my brother. I mostly believe him. But I stay alive because I always apply a bit of mistrust. “What do you want, Triston?”

“We’re meeting with the Russians tonight. I want you there.”

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“Fuck that.” I push the words through gritted teeth.

“You scare everyone, Killian. Even more than Mason, they fear you. That’s why they tried to kill you, and I want you to come and be your scariest fucking self. I want them to piss themselves in fear and then I am going to strip them of every motherfucking piece of Las Vegas real estate they own.”

I take a deep breath, considering Triston’s words. Triston is a strong man who shapes our world, makes us a success.

I’d be taking a risk going into a room with the Russians, Mason Kincaid, and Triston. Then again, if what Triston says is true, then this would be my chance to build a life with Chloe here where she can finish school, complete her dreams.

I’ve never been a man who let fear hold me back. “Fine. I’ll be there.”

“Really?”

“Really. Where and when?”

He rattles off the details. We hang up and I return to the bedroom to find Chloe still in bed, still naked, her green eyes searching mine. “Is everything all right?”

The next part of what I have to do is tough. I slide on top of her, settling my weight over hers. “It’s great, baby. We’ve got a meeting tonight to see if we can’t push the Russians from Vegas.”

She gives me a smile and then a long kiss.

Here comes the tough part. “Sweetheart.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m going to need you to leave Vegas for a bit.”

Confusion clouds her clear green gaze. “But... No... I don’t want to leave you. I’m safest with you.”

I kiss her again, though her mouth is stiff under my lips. “Here is the thing,” I whisper close to her ear. “If this goes sideways...”

“It could go sideways?” she asks, her voice getting higher with her fear.

“I don’t want you here. I want you far away where you’re safe.”

“Killian.”

I get up again and go out to the kitchen. Coming back, I hand her the folder. “Social security card, license, passport. There is travelling money and a Swiss account with enough for you to live on for the rest of your life.”

She stares at the file, a tear slipping down each cheek. “How much is enough to live on for the rest of my life?”

“Twenty million.”

A strangled cry rips from her throat. “Twenty million?”

“I’d have made it more, but I thought you’d be offended.”

She drops the folder and vaults into my arms, still naked. I catch her and then crash my mouth down over hers. I’d love to bury myself deep inside her, but I’ve got a plane ticket to buy. Hers.

“I’m sending you to the South of France. You can attend art school there, access Switzerland if you need. I have a friend, his contact info is in the folder, as is my mother’s.”

“Your mother?” her voice trembles.

“If you’re pregnant, you call her. She’ll help you, no matter what my brothers think about the situation.” I don’t want to let her go.

“I’m not leaving without you,” she cries, her arms locked around my neck.

“If everything goes the way it should, I’ll join you in less than twenty-four hours. If I don’t come, though, you don’t come back. Understand?”

She’s crying again, big tears rolling down her cheeks. “No. I don’t.”

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“Yes, you do,” I give her a soft smile. “I happen to know you’re ridiculously smart.”

“And I know you’re the strongest man in the world.”

I doubt that’s true, but I’m not telling her that. “Which is why I’ll be fine, and we’ll be walking on a French beach together in just a few days.”

I see her soften and I know she’ll go.

In the lining of her suitcase are several data files holding the whereabouts of the Russian operation. Tucked in the back of the folder are the instructions to destroy them should anything happen to me.

Mason isn’t going to kill me if everything I know will die with me. He needs the information I’ve collected.

Hopefully, it all goes down just like I’ve planned. But there is only one way to find out.

CHAPTERTWENTY-NINE

Killian

Kissing Chloe goodbye is the hardest fucking thing I’ve ever done. She doesn’t cry, but her eyes show all her worry. Her fear. I give her a long, slow kiss as the cab driver checks his watch.

“I’ll see you in a day or two.”

“Promise?” she squeezes my biceps. I’ve never made her a promise I didn’t intend to keep. And I’ll do everything in my power to keep this one, but I can’t say the word. I won’t mislead.

“I’ll do my best, sweetheart.”

“I love you,” she whispers, knowing what I mean.

“I love you too,” I squeeze her waist. I love her more than anything or anyone. Even myself. “It’s time to go.”

She gives a tentative nod. I hand her into the car, closing the door. Watching her drive away wrecks me and I stay out on the street until the cab has disappeared.

Then I head back into the apartment. We’ll all be patted down, weapons not allowed in the meeting, but I arm myself anyway. Two knives, three guns strapped to my body, one small pistol tucked by my junk so it will be difficult to find.

The entire time, I just picture Chloe and what she looked like driving away. The sight of her tears, of her face in the window of the cab.

Those fuckers are going to pay. Slipping out into the setting sun, I stay in the dark shadows. I don’t go straight to Smith Real Estate Development.

Instead, I go to Dimitri’s home. I’ve watched him before. From the shadows, I see him in the window as he swings a small girl into his arms.

“Alina,” I whisper to myself. His daughter. Four years old. I don’t know what happened to Alina’s mother. It doesn’t matter.

What's important is understanding a man's weak points. A car pulls up, and the nanny climbs out. She's the prettiest nanny I've ever seen, and I wonder what the story is there, but it's not a lever I'll pull tonight, since I'm not certain.

I wait to watch the nanny arrive upstairs, Alina leans out from her father's embrace, the nanny catches the girl and pulls her into her arms.

It's the way Dimitri hovers over them both that I know...if he's not fucking the caretaker of his little girl, he wants to.

I tuck that one away as I start for my family's offices. I know all I need to for tonight.

I arrive early but wait in the shadows, watching all the players assemble. My brothers first, looking resigned. Mason, Jake, and Leo next, moving with the confidence of men who believe themselves in charge.

And finally, Dimitri along with two of his foremen. I enter last.

The guard at the elevator has been tasked with patting everyone down. "Ken," I say with a nod, pulling three of my four pistols from their holsters and one of the two knives.

"That's quite the spread," he looks down at the tray where I've placed my weapons.

I shrug. "Big day."

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He runs his wand over my back and down the outside of my legs, but I know his drill. The gun I've tucked next to my dick doesn't set off his detector.

Clearing me, I enter the elevator with my knife and my gun still tucked away. I reach into my pants and pull it out, placing it in my waistband under my jacket.

The elevator opens on the top floor where all the men are assembled, waiting for my arrival.

"The man of the hour," Dimitri calls, his Russian accent thicker than usual.

I stop, cocking my head, my feet spread wide. I am never the man of the hour. I don't stand in the spotlight. "I think that honor belongs to Preston Wingate." And then I look at Mason. "Preston spilled every secret he knew about you and your family to Dimitri in the back alley behind the piano bar. I heard them too, of course."

Both Dimitri and Mason go a few shades paler. I've caught them both off guard. Good.

I'm not trying to put a target on my own back. But if they think they're backing me into a corner, they're wrong.

Reaching into my pocket, I toss a little drive at my brother Triston. He catches it easily. "Just so we're all on the same page, that is everything I overheard Preston say."

No one is aware of how deep my intel goes. But I'm going to make it clear. "Upon

my death,” I start, looking at Triston, Mason, and Dimitri...

But just then, one of the Russians lunges at me, a knife in hand. Shit.

Ken was lax with everyone...

I grab his hand as he makes his lunge, twisting it behind his back and pulling him tight to my chest as my other hand wraps around his throat. “Too bad, motherfucker.” And then I squeeze.

He tries to escape but my grip is too tight. “Killian.” Triston holds up his hands.

But I don’t attend my brother. I look at Dimitri. I know that attempt was done at his order. “You have something you want to say?”

“You killed my cousin.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So? That will not stand?—”

“Shut up.” And then I squeeze tighter, the guy in my arms blacking out. I loosen my grip.

“I have it on surveillance.”

“Then you also have Antonelli Vendetti’s death on video, and you know that Alexander brutally attacked my girl.”

“Your girl...” Dimitri whispers, looking at Triston.

The guy in my arms is coming to, so I put a little more pressure on his throat. “That’s right. We both know he was going to kill her. Now tell me, Dimitri, what would you do if some sadistic fuck showed up at Southridge Elementary and attacked little Alina as she came out of her preschool class?”

He snarls as he bares his teeth, taking a step toward me. But I pull his foreman up, squeezing his throat again. “And what about that pretty nanny of yours... What would you do to protect her?”

Dimitri stares at me like his gaze alone could make me drop dead. Too bad I’m immune to that shit.

“Think of the things I know about you, Dimitri...” I show my teeth right back. “Think of what my brother, or Mason, or Luc Andriani might be able to do with all that knowledge as he takes over the Italian Mafia here in Vegas.” And then I throw his man on the floor.

“What do you want?” Dimitri snarls.

Triston is stone-faced, but Mason, I catch his half smile out of the corner of my eye. This is exactly what he hoped would happen.

“I want you to honor the deal you made. Don’t think I don’t know how you’ve been meeting with the Vendettis.” I wag my finger like a scolding school mum.

I see his fist clenching and unclenching.

“And...” I give him a cold smile. “I want assurances that Chloe is to remain untouched. Free to move about the city as safe as a girl can be. And I will give you the same in kind.”

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“You’re an animal,” Dimitri snarls.

“A monster, actually. But I’m Chloe’s monster, so I’m going to need your word.”

“You have my word,” Dimitri spits. “Alexander acted out of turn where Chloe was concerned. But killing the Vendetti was a favor to you.” He looks at Mason. “Antonelli was making plans that would have been to your detriment.”

Mason’s face remains completely neutral as he asks, “Are we ready to begin?”

Several men nod. My part is done but I’ll attend the meeting. The more I know, the better off I’ll be. But as I move toward the conference room, Jake stops me, handing me a stack of papers.

“What is this?” I look down at them.

“A job offer,” he winks at me. “I want you by my side, Killian.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have installed a camera at my front door.”

“I left the back one alone. I had no intention of disrupting a shadow.” And then he enters the conference room.

I look down at the papers. I can’t be just a shadow anymore. Chloe needs to live in the light. Which means, I’m going to have to play nice with the Kincaids.

That’s all right. It’s what men do.

And as for the Russians...they will feel my wrath. No one threatens my girl.

CHAPTERTHIRTY

Killian

The rest of the meeting happens exactly as it's supposed to happen. Contracts are signed, agreements are made.

I'm positioned near the door, leaning against the wall, a silent centaur that warns the members of this meeting not to act up again.

The man I contained has had bruises blooming along his throat over the course of the hour. He's going to be wearing his collar high for the next few weeks.

The Russians finally leave, having to pass me by as I glare at each in turn until only Kincaids and Smiths remain in the room. I don't move.

This is both a position of power and the best opportunity for exit should shit go south. I both block the door and can use it at my convenience.

"Killian, why don't you come sit?" Triston asks from his place at the head of the table.

"No." Falling in love has not softened me in this regard. I don't explain myself.

Mason turns to me, leaning back in his chair. "You did good today."

I eye him with suspicion. "Let's not pretend. Yesterday you thought me a liability. Chloe too."

I see his slight wince.

I raise my finger. “You’re forgetting, Mason. I was there when you decided Charlotte was yours. A week in and you were rewriting all the rules, including where we stood in your business. It wasn’t until Gris got together with Arabella that we were back in your good graces.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m acting just as you did. And everyone thought your actions were a liability too. Were they right or wrong?”

“I get your point, Killian. But I don’t make a habit of killing random men.”

“Bullshit.” I push off the wall. “Preston was planned. And Alexander tried to kill my woman. A man touched your wife like that, he wouldn’t see the light of day, would he?”

Mason gives a single nod in acknowledgment.

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I pull a small drive from my pocket. Holding it in the air, I eye him with all the alpha I possess. “This is the last time you question me and I justify my actions. If you don’t have faith in me, my sanity, or my allegiance, there is no place for me here.”

And then I swing my gaze to Triston, giving him an equal measure of my glare. He holds up his hands. “Understood, Killian. And for whatever it’s worth. You were right and I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

The apology does make me feel better, especially since it’s a very public one and I give my brother a nod of acknowledgment.

I toss the drive onto the table and it slides toward Mason. He covers it in his hand. “Is this the intel on the Russians?”

“A bit.” I give him a wolfish smile.

Irritation flares in eyes. I get it. I’m being difficult. But I’d like to live for a while.

He starts to speak, but Jake clears his throat. “Mason, this is what makes Killian exceptional. A ruthless attention to detail and the ability to see several steps ahead. You ought to appreciate both.”

Mason gives a stiff nod.

I’m well aware that Jake and Mason are playing good cop/bad cop. But I’ll join the game if I can learn some of Jake Kincaid’s tricks.

“What will I find on this drive?”

“I wanted to make it worth your while. It’s all the details on Ivan Ivanov.” He’s Dimitri’s most lethal foreman and the ringleader of their drug trade.

Mason jerks his chin in acceptance. The ability to strike at Ivan would hurt the Russian’s operation deeply. I’ve thrown him one bone, but it’s a large one.

Putting the drive in his shirt pocket, he and Jake stand. “How are revenues since opening your operation to the tunnel?” he asks as he stands.

“Up two hundred percent,” Triston smiles. “I know it will slow as the novelty wears off, but the money coming in now will be used to pick the bones of the Russians and Italians when the time comes.”

“Agreed,” Mason shakes hands with Triston, Ryker, and Gris before he approaches the door. Then he holds his hand out to me.

I pause for a moment before I slide my hand into his. His shake is firm, his gaze steady as he says, “I look forward to our future together.”

Gris comes to stand next to Mason, and he gives me the smallest wink before he leans over to Mason. “Just so you know, if shit goes sideways in Las Vegas, Arabella will be placed in Killian’s care. He’s got safehouses all over the world, money and supplies stashed in each of them. And he saves his violence for men, women turn him into a kitten.”

For one second, surprise lights Mason’s gaze. Then he leans closer as he says in a voice just above a whisper. “Your father a piece of shit too?”

Are we bonding? “You have no idea.”

One corner of his mouth tips up. “I might. A bit.”

Maybe he does. I’ve heard the details of his father’s death and the events that led to it.

Mason and Jake leave, and I turn to go as well. If I hurry, I might be able to stop Chloe before she even gets on the plane.

But Triston’s voice stops me. “Killian. Wait.”

I shake out my shoulders. “What is it, Triston? I’m about meeting’d out.”

He chuckles. “I’ve got something for you.”

I turn with a question, wondering if I should be worried. But he pulls a canvas out from behind the table in the corner. I cock my head, but before he gives it to me, Ryker clears his throat. “Killian?”

I look at my other brother, something in his tone making the hair on the back of my neck stand. “Yeah?”

Ryker’s mouth twitches. “I...I wondered what you meant about the comment about our father.”

I shrug. This is not something I plan to discuss. I never have and I doubt I ever will.

But his demeanor makes me pause. His head is bent as he rubs at the back of his neck. “I’ve wondered...” he stops, lifting his head so that our eyes meet. “...if you knew the truth.”

My blood runs cold. “The truth?”

“Is that what changed you?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Rush asks.

My tongue is stuck in my mouth, but Ryker just shrugs. “Have you ever wondered why you, Triston, and Gris all have this polished look while Killian and I appear far rougher?”

His comment throws me. It’s not that I haven’t thought the same, but it has nothing to do with how I came into the world and my feelings about my father.

“What are you talking about, Ryker?” Gris growls out.

Ryker lets out a long slow breath. “I’ve kept this information to myself out of respect to our mother, but we’re all grown men, and I know the secret hurts Killian.”

“Secret?” my voice is barely a raspy whisper, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Our mother had an affair. You can see how it might happen. Being married to a selfish prick who was hardly ever with us. But Killian and I...we are the result.”

Bile churns in my stomach. “You mean to tell me that you—me—we...have the same biological father?”

“That’s right.” He gives our other three brothers an apologetic wince. “The love of

our mother's life."

Light explodes behind my eyes. "But?—"

Ryker moves to stand right in front of me, his hand coming to my shoulder. "Killian? What's the matter? I thought..."

"He told me..." I can barely push out the words, my chest is too tight, my head swimming. "He told me..."

"Who told you? Told you what?" Triston moves to my other side.

"Our father. Your father. He told me that I was the product of a vicious attack. That I was born out of filth..."

Ryker's teeth snap together, a feral noise coming from his throat. "Tell me everything."

For the first time in twenty years, I do. I tell them about that night, about what he told me, and about how I've believed since that day that I was made of violence and darkness. Telling them, ridding myself of the words, it lightens me in ways I've never imagined. Sharing with Chloe first really helped. It loosened my tongue, shaped the words.

When I'm done, I see the stunned faces of all four of my brothers. "Jesus. Fucking. Christ," Ryker spits. "He was always a selfish, vindictive asshole, but that..."

"Killian," Gris comes to my other side, Rush just on Ryker's shoulder so my brothers are ringing me. "How have you even fucking survived that?"

"No more killing," Triston murmurs. "We're changing your job."

I appreciate what he says. And I know that changes are coming. I welcome them, truthfully. I'm ready to step out of the shadows and be a more visible member of our team.

And the support of all my brothers today has removed a heavy shroud that's been over my shoulders.

But I am who I am now. And if any man touches Chloe, he will feel my wrath.

Triston must sense my shift in thought, it's like he hears me mention Chloe in my private thoughts, because he steps away, grabbing the canvas that he'd set down when I'd began to speak.

Turning it to face me, I see Chloe's painting for the first time. "I rescued this from your loft."

But I don't answer.

Instead, I stare. It's me, but a me I've never seen before. I'm so strong, and...beautiful. Made of empty space, of dark sky, but filled with beautiful stars. My throat closes as I reach my hands for the painting, touching the places where bullets have ripped the canvas.

"I can't believe..."

"She loves you, man." Triston gives my arm a light punch. "And she thinks you're a beautiful person."

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“Or a god. Which is weird,” Rush says with a shrug.

“It’s the best a man can hope for,” Gris scowls at our youngest brother. “You’ll understand someday.”

“I doubt it,” he fires back.

But I hold the canvas in my hands, knowing that it’s time for me to go get my girl. “Question,” I say, done with brotherly bonding. “How likely is Mason to allow me to use his jet?”

CHAPTERTHIRTY-ONE

Chloe

The plane ride, a red-eye, leaves me exhausted. I’ve barely strung two nights of decent sleep together and I hardly know French, so in the end, I muddle through getting a taxi, by just showing him the slip that Killian gave me with an address.

Once I’m there, I drag my suitcase up to a door, studying the colorful frame. This doesn’t appear to be a hotel, but a private residence.

I lift my hand to knock, the door immediately opens, a woman in a smart uniform on the other side.

“Miss Clark?” she asks with a smile, her English perfect despite her French accent.

My brain is so addled by the lack of sleep that it takes me a full three seconds to realize that she's using the name on all documents that Killian gave me. "Yes."

She gestures for me to come in.

I step through the door and immediately gasp because the view through the back of the house is stunning, the house right on the ocean.

"Are you hungry, ma'am?" The woman asks as she dips into a curtsy. I turn back to her. Is she here to cook for me?

"No. Thank you. Just tired."

She gestures for me to follow her up the stairs. I do, carrying my suitcase up the wrought iron staircase and down a long hall with a picture window at the end. Turning into one of the doors, I find myself in a stunning bedroom with a Killian-sized bed.

The sight of it makes my chest ache.

Is he all right? What's happening back in Vegas? I came because I knew in my heart that leaving helped him the most, but I hate being here.

All right, under different circumstances, I'd love being here. But nothing feels right without Killian.

Heading into the large bathroom, I shower, brush my teeth, and then crawl into bed. As I close my eyes, visions of Killian fill my head, and despite being exhausted, it takes me forever to fall asleep.

When I wake, the entire day has passed, the sun setting. I push up from the bed,

looking out the large picture window with views out over the water. The sky is bathed in shades of orange, pink, and red.

I just watch for a second and then grabbing my phone, I head down the stairs and out the door to put my toes in the sand and watch the sky change.

The lapping of the water relaxes my shoulders as I turn my face up to the sky. "Please be all right, Killian," I say into the light breeze, my arms wrapping around my middle. "Please come back to me."

"I already did."

Spinning, I gasp. He stands behind me, a cocksure grin on his face as he opens his arms.

He looks exactly the same and somehow different. Lighter. Brighter than I've ever seen him.

For a moment I just stand there, overcome with emotion and then I close the distance between us, as he pulls me off my feet and into his arms.

I'm wrapped around him before I've even said a word, my legs about his waist, my arms circling his neck. "You came."

"I would have been here sooner, but I flew into England and then had to take the Chunnel."

"England? Were you visiting family?"

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“Something like that. And also losing the guys tailing me.” But he gives me an easy smile.

“Tailing you?” I feel the prick of worry, but he shakes his head.

“Nothing to worry about. Everything is as it should be.” Then he starts carrying me inside.

“Where are we going?”

“I need to fuck my woman,” he murmurs in my ear. “It’s been too long.”

I giggle despite myself. “It’s been like thirty-six hours.”

“Exactly.” He steps back inside and then yells down the hall, “We’ll need dinner in an hour,” before he starts carrying me up the stairs.

I’m not going to argue. I’m hungry for food and starving for him too. “You’re sure everything is good in Vegas?”

“Everything is good. The Russians are a longer-term problem, but we’re making good progress. And in terms of your safety, all is well.”

I don’t ask the details. I know it’s better if I don’t know.

He enters the bedroom, clearly familiar with the house and lays me on the bed, shucking off my clothes between kisses.

I'm naked before he's pulling off his own shirt, yanking down his pants and leaving them at his knees as he sinks inside me.

We both groan in satisfaction, he feels so good.

Still inside me, he pushes up, staring down at me with dark eyes. "There is something I wanted to ask you."

"Now?"

"Now." And then reaching into his pocket, he pulls out a box. He's buried deep inside me, filling me, as he cracks open the box. "Chloe, will you marry me?"

I gasp as the large diamond, encrusted with emeralds, winks down at me from where it's nestled into the velvet folds of the box. "You...you're proposing?"

"I am," he says as he drops the ring on the bed, and then presses his body back on top of mine, wrapping me in his arms. "Because wherever you are is where I'm home."

Emotion clogs my throat as I nod. "I feel the same."

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes."

His mouth devours mine as he pulls out and pushes back inside me, making me forget all about danger, and France, and marriage. All I can feel is Killian and he is so beautiful.

He ratchets up the pace until I'm begging him to make me cum. With a deep thrust, I break apart, crying his name. He cums with me, his groan filling my ears as I hold

him tight. My body slowly floats back to reality. I look to my right, the ring winking at me from where it's still nestled in its box.

He sees it too, and reaching for it, he pulls it from the velvet folds and slips it onto my finger.

Then he laces his fingers through mine, locking our hands together as he kisses my lips. The sight of our hands locked together like that steals my breath.

He kisses me again, before nuzzling into my neck. "So how do you like your new house?"

I scrunch my brow, trying to look at him. "My house?"

"I doubt I'm going to be easy to be married to, but there are a few perks to being Lady Killian."

"Lady?"

"By the way, my mother would like to meet the woman who has, in her words, given her her son back."

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:43 am

I try to process everything Killian has said, but he's pulling me up from the bed and taking me into the bathroom.

"What are we doing?"

"Taking a long, hot shower before dinner," he rumbles. "You can ask me all your questions while I soap you from head to toe."

"Oh," I feel my cheeks heat with pleasure. But as I step into the hot spray and he grabs the soap, I take him up on the offer. "You saw your mother?"

"I did."

I know how Killian feels about his mother. "And?"

"It was good," he says as he starts to scrub my body. I thought I might ask him about the house, or the title of lady, but instead, I'm stunned into silence as he shares the lie his father told him.

The pain I feel for him settles like a brick in my chest. So, he wasn't made from darkness either. He was shaped into it by the man who raised him. It's not that I don't understand being at the mercy of cruelty when you're too young and innocent to fight.

But I hate that's what made him. He's bent down washing my legs and I thread my fingers into his hair even as his head rests on my stomach. "Killian," I hear the pain I feel tighten my voice.

“If we ever have kids,” he starts. “We’re going to bathe them in beautiful light, aren’t we?”

“Yes.” It’s a simple promise, but one I know I’ll keep. “Promise.”

He looks up at me then. “I promise too.”

CHAPTERTHIRTY-TWO

Killian

For the next three days,Chloe and I relax in the South of France. It’s magical. We eat, we walk on the beach, we make love, and we talk.

Not of danger, not of darkness, but of light and hope and plans for the future. Chloe has pleaded sick with all of her professors, and as she never misses class, they’ve given her extensions.

But I try to press upon her that she can just take the classes again next semester. Or switch majors.

She has a gift, one she’s been hiding because she’s been afraid to fail. That’s no way to live, and if there one thing I can give her, it’s the chance to make her dreams come true.

Lazing on the beach, I watch Chloe in the water, admiring the sun-kissed honey of her skin. France is much laxer about tops on the beach, but Chloe leaves hers on. There is no way I’m letting another man see those gorgeous tits. And the tan lines are also fantastic.

She swims into the shore, her hips swaying as she works her way out of the water,

twisting her hair up on top of her head.

The beach in front of the house is pretty quiet, but a few men walk by, both giving Chloe a long look.

I get it. She's stunning.

But I rise from my chair, tattoos on full display as I glare. They get the message and keep moving, but I head for the shore to meet her, determined to station myself at Chloe's side.

But I've no more than reached her side when my phone starts chirping.

I haven't missed the sound, in fact the break has been restorative. I'm not certain I've ever taken a regular vacation before, but this is something Chloe and I are going to do often.

I haven't felt this alive, this happy, or relaxed for a very long time.

Chloe fishes my phone out of the bag she's set between our chairs and hands it to me.

I grimace when I see Triston's name. But I only hesitate for one more second before I answer. "Hello?"

"Killian," his voice holds a tightness that instantly sets me on edge.

"What's wrong?"

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“I’m adding Mason to the call.”

Ten seconds later I hear Mason’s deep voice, “Killian?”

“Here.”

Chloe is looking at me with deep concern. I sit it in the chair and take her hand.

Mason lets out a long breath of air. “Temptation, our club, was destroyed last night.”

Chloe gives a soft cry before she covers her mouth with her hand. She clearly heard.

My jaw goes granite hard. “Who?”

“We think the Russians, but we don’t know for certain. We’re looking into it, but we could use you here in Vegas.”

I look at Chloe. I’d be taking her back into a war. But she gives a faint nod. She understands.

These are my brothers. If they’re in a fight, I need to be at their side. I can be pissy with them all I want, but if this is life or death, they’re going to need me.

“I’ll fly back tomorrow.”

“I can send the jet for you,” Mason offers.

I grimace. I'm keeping this location private. It's Chloe's escape if she needs it. "I'll take it. Pick up point in Paris?"

It means we'll spend the day on trains and then planes, but it's worth the extra hassle.

"Of course. And thank you, Killian. I know why you left, and I know the part I played in making Vegas less hospitable, and I'm sorry for that." He lets out a heavy sigh. "I wish you'd been here. If you had, I doubt this would have happened."

"How bad is the loss?"

"Two injured, no dead, but the club is a complete rebuild."

Someone was sending a message. They're not letting Mason win Vegas without a fight.

"I'm glad it wasn't worse." The Smiths have picked their side. We'll rule Vegas with the Kincaids, but we'll twist ourselves so deeply into their operation, they'll never get us out. And in doing so, we're going to own a very large piece of the pie. I don't need Triston's charts to tell me that.

"Me too," Mason answers. "So...what time should I have the jet arrive?"

"Late. We'll need the day to travel." Which means, if he was attempting to figure out our location, we could be anywhere in Europe by what I just shared.

I hear his pause and then his light chuckle. "You really give nothing away, do you?"

I smile. "But you'll keep trying, won't you?"

He murmurs in appreciation. "See you in a few days," he says before he leaves the

call.

“Killian?” Tris asks after the line clicks.

“I’m here.”

“Are you worried about Mason and what he might be able to do to us?”

“No,” I smile at Chloe before getting up from my chair. “But I’ll keep an eye on him. I know he’s got more resources than us but we...”

“What?”

“We’ve actually been trained for royalty. And no one knows how to keep power like a royal.”

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I hear the squeak of Triston's chair as he leans back. "Well said. Enjoy your evening with your queen."

I hang up, moving back toward Chloe, her body on full display as she suns herself in her lounge. I plan to enjoy my queen to the fullest.

Not just tonight.

For the rest of my life.

EPILOGUE

Triston

One month later...

Weddings are not my scene. Despite the fact that women tend to be free and easy, the emotion involved in the ceremony is enough to make me steer clear, usually. But as it's my brother who's getting married, my attendance is required.

"You may kiss the bride," the justice of the peace calls out with a large smile on her face.

Killian kisses Chloe, appearing about as smitten as a man can be. The change Chloe has brought out in him is nothing short of astounding.

It's like she's switched Killian back on. He went from moody, withdrawn, dangerous

to relaxed and happy. I wouldn't go so far as to say talkative.

Except with Chloe. Every time the two of them are at a family event, I catch them in a corner talking and laughing, Killian more animated than I've ever seen him. I don't even know that man, but I'd really like to have the chance.

She's the perfect woman for Killian, and honestly, she's fitting into our family exceptionally well.

My mother looks back at me from the row ahead, a smile gracing her lips. Chloe has brought Killian and our mother back together, which will likely make Chloe the favorite daughter-in-law. Not that I'll give her any competition. I will not add another Mrs. Smith to the collection.

My brothers and I are all driven men, working tirelessly to bring our family to the pinnacle of dominance in the Las Vegas real estate market. I don't have either the time or the inclination to date a woman with any seriousness.

In fact, I have a rule. I only ever date a woman for thirty days. Any longer than that, and they start getting ideas...

But I'm still happy for Killian and glad a few of my brothers are adding a bit of softness to the family.

Chloe calls our mother, she soothes Killian, she even baked cookies for our board meeting last week.

Watching Killian bring them to the meeting was hilarious. He's never embarrassed about anything, but he looked slightly uncomfortable as he dropped a Tupperware container on the table. Then again, he also didn't share any of them, eating them himself because, as he phrased it, "She's mine to eat as often as I wish."

Our brother Rush had quirked his brow. “You mean the food she makes is yours?—”

“You heard me,” he growled back.

Chloe and Killian join hands, and turning to face the crowd, they raise them above their heads, as the small group cheers.

“Woot,” I call, actually meaning it. I’m happy for my brother. I really am. And another marriage in our family has brought us closer to our real estate partners, the Kincaids. Win. Win.

We’re at one of Mason’s hotels for the ceremony and reception. Mason and I are working on the kind of deal that will bring my family to the next level. It’s a game changer.

Which is why Mason volunteered this room for Killian and Chloe as a peace offering, and as the space overlooks a lush garden and the private pool beyond, it’s a lovely setting for the twenty people they have here today.

My family was invited, a few of the Kincaids, a couple of Chloe’s friends, and Chloe’s mother.

Who is a piece of work.

She took one look at the hotel, the guests, and she has set herself to being some sort of money vacuum, telling first Killian, and then me and my brothers all about her financial woes.

I’ve seen her kind before. She’ll try to garner some sympathy in the hopes of receiving aid. What I find appalling is that she has no shame acting this way at her daughter’s wedding.

She's in the row behind me, and she's working Rush. "The shrimp that was served at the pre-event spread was divine. I've not had anything like that in ages, we can hardly afford it."

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I can hear the pout in her voice, and it sets my teeth on edge. Rush has a great deal of skill in this regard, and he makes a noncommittal sound that Barbara mistakes as sympathy.

“It’s been so hard, it was such a relief to come here even for a weekend. I’d love to stay longer, spend time with my daughter, but I can barely manage the hotel fees.”

Rush doesn’t say anything, focusing on Chloe and Killian as they pass us by on their way down the aisle.

Barbara doesn’t even look up to notice her daughter passing, as she keeps talking to Rush. “The three casinos you own, surely they have hotels attached?”

Rush shrugs. “My department is casino floor management. You’ll have to speak with Ryker about hotel stays.”

She huffs out a breath. “He said to talk to you since you comp the rooms at the casino level.”

“Huh,” Rush says, stepping past her to follow Killian and Chloe. I’d give her the room she wants to shut her up, but once you give into a person like that, she’ll come back for more until she’s run the well dry.

I step out into the aisle as well, Barbara falling into step next to me. “I bet you put your mother up in your hotels. You strike me as the son who takes care of a poor old woman.”

My brows lift, as I deftly dodge the request. “My mother doesn’t like staying in hotels, and she doesn’t wish to burden her sons, so she bought a house in Vegas for her visits.”

Barbara sniffs, clearly annoyed by my answer. I didn’t lie. My mother dislikes hotels and with the amount she comes to stay in Vegas, she thought it better to buy a home and staff it.

Killian and Chloe stop at the other end of the room next to the glass door that leads outside. We’ll have a quick drink outside while this room is changed over for the sit-down dinner.

Killian and Chloe could have made this as elaborate as they wished, but neither wanted a big event. Between all that’s happening here in Vegas and their own preferences, small made sense.

Beautiful bouquets of bright tropical flowers are brought in to match the garden outside as the chairs we just sat in are rearranged to accommodate the tables. Barbara clucks her tongue. “So tacky.”

My jaw clenches. Tacky is hitting up your new in-laws for free shit.

Chloe’s taste in flowers is excellent. She likes bright colors, artistic flare, and they match the setting perfectly. Most of the guests are already outside the now-open doors, helping themselves to champagne and oysters. A warm breeze blows into the room as I follow the group out.

Barbara snaps her fingers. “You,” she calls over to one of the set-up crew. “Is there anything to drink besides Champagne? I prefer a chardonnay.”

I turn too, to tell Barbara that the bartender is the better person to make this request.

But I stop as my gaze collides with the woman Barbara has asked.

Light grey eyes meet mine, large and haunting and framed with thick, long lashes. Her dark hair is pulled back in a loose ponytail, a few tendrils framing her face.

Her features are delicate with lips so full and lush...

My eyes dart down her body, noting her slender but curvy frame, accentuated by a crisp white oxford and fitted black pants.

She looks away from me, a slight flush coloring her cheeks. "Of course, ma'am. I'll find that for you right away."

And then she's gone.

Barbara makes a pleased purr next to me and then sails out into the garden, helping herself to an oyster before she picks up one of the pre-poured glasses of champagne.

I need to go out and congratulate Killian and Chloe. I've got a gift for them as well.

It isn't traditional. In fact, it's not even a present I could wrap. Instead, it's a promise to them both. If anything happens to Killian, I will make it my first priority to see to Chloe's well-being.

But I don't head outside. Instead, I wait for the waitress to return.

I've seen all manner of beautiful woman. But there is something so vulnerable in her features, gentle in her manner, that I find myself intensely curious.

She appears again walking toward me, but stops, looking for Barbara.

“Allow me,” I volunteer, closing the distance between us. But instead of taking the glass from her hand, I reach into my pocket, brandishing a card with my personal number.

I take the drink and then hand her the card.

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Her brow furrows. “Sir?”

“Call me.” I’m not even sure what I’m offering. A date. A fuck. I just know I’d like to stare into those eyes again soon.

Her cheeks turn a delightful shade of pink as she dips her chin. “I’m sorry sir, but I can’t...Mr. Kincaid has strict policies.”

Is she denying me? Mason steps back into the room. “Triston? What’s taking you so long?” Then his gaze slashes to the blushing woman.

One of his brows lift. “Honeyeh, is my business partner giving you trouble?”

Honeyeh. It sounds likeHoney-ahand makes me think of licking her. I bet she’s delicious. “Honeyeh. What an interesting name.”

She slips my card into her pants pocket. “It’s Persian. My mother...” Her hand flutters delicately. Is she a dancer? “My apologies for dallying, Mr. Kincaid. I will make certain the tables are set very quickly.”

“It isn’t your fault, Honeyeh, I can see Tris was distracting you.” The accusation shining in Mason’s eyes is enough to make me pause. This woman means something to him.

I’ve got big plans. I’m helping Mason to complete a hostile takeover of one of the Russian Bratva casinos that he allowed access to his tunnel. But from there... I can connect two more of my own. It will take us from multi-millionaires to billionaires

and secure my family's legacy. But I'll need Mason's help.

"Actually, I wanted to offer her a job."

This time, both of Mason's brows lift in question. "She is wonderful. Which is why I can't allow you steal her." But I see the pleased gleam in his eye. I'd be helping him by hiring Honeyeh. In terms of favors, it doesn't get much easier. "But if you must, I will allow it, for Honeyeh's sake."

"Fair enough," I say, looking back at Honeyeh. Her eyes are wide, her lips parted in surprise.

My gaze slides down her body again as I consider what position I might hire her for. Maybe a maid...

I can put her in one of those French maid uniforms.

Then again, this is a favor to Mason so I'm going to have to keep my hands to myself. I'm a man of iron control.

But as I look back at Honeyeh, I have to wonder just how much that belief is going to be tested...

YAY!"Kings of Las Vegas" is getting HOT, HOT, HOT! Want to read more of Triston's story? King of Desire is up next!!!

BONUS EPILOGUE

Chloe

One year later...

I smooth down my hunter green A-line, knee-length dress. “You’re sure this is the right dress?”

Killian comes up behind me, looking me up and down in the mirror. “Well. I want to take it off you, bend you over the vanity, and fuck you senseless. So yeah, I think it’s good.”

Even after a year of marriage, he still makes me blush. I flick my loose waves over my shoulder, the nerves making my belly flutter. I could use a bit of calming. “I mean, I wouldn’t say no as long as we’re quick. We’ve got to leave in the next fifteen minutes or we won’t make it to the gallery on time.”

His eyes darken as a sinister smile curls his lips. Then, he’s pulling the zipper down and sliding the dress off my body even as he says, “I’ll be quick, baby, but artists get to be fashionably late. It’s a rule.”

The dress clears my three-inch heels, Killian carefully removing it as I step out so it doesn’t land in a crumpled ball on the floor. Instead, Killian lays it neatly across the bed. That’s what a year of marriage will do. We’re calming down.

“Underwear,” he barks, and I nearly laugh. Calming down a little. I quickly shuck the thong off, catching it on the second stiletto.

I go to take the shoe off, but I hear his rumble of dissent. “Don’t you dare.”

“Killian,” I gasp. “You are so bossy?—”

But I don’t get out more as he places a hand between my shoulder blades, pushing me down so that I’m bent over the vanity’s chair.

I look over my shoulder in time to see him squat down, before he licks between my

legs.

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Hot desire courses through me, as his tongue hits me all the places I need it most. I'm soaked in a second, making little mewls of encouragement as he swirls his tongue around my clit.

But true to his word, he doesn't stay long. He's up, shucking down his pants and pulling up his collared shirt before he sinks inside me.

I've gotten used to his size, but from behind like this, it's so deep that I gasp, tensing a bit.

He stops, holding my hip as he catches my gaze in the mirror. "You all right, sweetheart?"

"Fine, my love, just adjusting," I pant out, He feels so good, and I really am glad to just be in this moment with him, instead of all up in my head with nerves.

"Take your time. Once you're ready, I'll make you cum in two minutes and I won't even mess up that beautiful hair.

I give him a faint smile. "Ready."

With his hand planted on my back to keep my upper half from bouncing, he starts with slow smooth strokes, but quickly ratchets up the pace until we're both panting from the exertion and the building orgasm.

It's exactly what I needed to make me forget how nervous I am and just focus on what's really important. I love my husband with all my heart and no matter how hard

I fall down, he will always catch me.

It's that thought that sends me over the edge, my cry filling the bedroom as I break apart, cumming hard.

With a roar, he follows, his hot cum filling me as he continues pumping in and out of me. I'm going to leak his juices the entire gallery opening, but honestly, I like it. Even if he's across the room, it will be my reminder that I'm Killian's and he's mine.

No matter how terrible this is, he'll be there for me.

I lift my head and look in the mirror. "Shoot." My hair is fine, but my eye makeup is all kinds of messed up.

He chuckles. "I think you look perfect."

"Killian," I swat at his hand, still planted in the middle of my back. "I've got to fix this!"

He eases back to let me up, but the moment I stand, he's pulling me in his arms and kissing my lips. "You'll look gorgeous no matter what and your paintings are incredible."

I huff out a breath. "I'm glad you think so, because if no one buys them..." I don't finish, the very idea making me sick to my stomach.

"I'll buy them all, baby. Don't you worry."

"I meant you might have to take me home crying, not that you'd have to buy them!"

"I like them anyway. I'm not sure I want someone else hanging them in his house,"

he grumps, even as he leads me into the bathroom.

But I nip at my lip even as he uses a cloth to wipe me down. “Maybe this was a bad idea...”

“It’s a great idea.” He stands up straight and then kisses me again. “I’m so proud of you for taking this chance, I know how difficult it was.” Then he’s bending down to pull my thong, still caught on my stiletto, back up my legs. “I only meant there is a real silver lining to you not having buyers.”

Maybe. I’ll be crushed. But then...I’ll find a job working for a gallery instead of trying to show my work. And I know one thing for certain, I’ll be great at holding an artist’s hands through this process.

I start applying more eyeliner, giving my eyes a smokey look to hide the smears. It looks good and the orgasm really did take the edge off my nerves.

Killian comes back with my dress, even as I’m reapplying gloss to my lips. Stepping into the dress, he zips me up.

“Ready?”

I nod, letting out a long breath. I’m ready. I slip my hand into his, starting toward the bedroom door. But then I stop. “I almost forgot...”

“What?”

“You can’t beat anyone up for any reason. Not even if they disparage my work...”

Killian gives me a fierce glare. “I can’t promise that.”

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“Killian.” I smack the back of his hand. “You can’t start a brawl in an art gallery.”

“Your show would make the papers.”

My mouth parts, my eyes huge for a moment before I laugh. He’s not wrong... “Let’s not test that statement. No fighting.”

He rolls his shoulders. “I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you.”

He pulls me close. “I love you and I’m proud of you.”

“I love you, too.” I draw in the rich scent of his cologne, the portrait I did of him hanging next to the door.

Bullet holes still litter one side of the piece. Killian claims they’re fitting. It makes the canvas a little tattered, just like him.

But for me, Killian is still my world. My universe. And as long as he’s in it, no matter what happens, I will always be filled with his beautiful starlight.