



Relentless Knight

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: "My brother's hitman broke down my door at midnight..."

"Now I'm addicted to the way he breaks all his rules."

They say Lance Knight bathes in blood money.
That he's the devil who keeps my brother's empire running.
The enforcer who can kill with just his bare hands.

I should be terrified when he becomes my shadow.
Instead, I'm burning for the monster assigned to protect me.
(Ten years of forbidden fantasies finally within reach.)

Then the nightmares tear through me.
His name rips from my throat in the dark.
And suddenly he's there – all raw power and deadly grace.

One touch to chase away my fears.
One kiss to unleash years of need.
One night that ruins us both forever.

The Italians want war.
My brother would kill him for touching me.
And I just found out I'm carrying his baby.

Guess which secret will get us all killed first?

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QUINN

My brain feels like scrambled eggs as I pour over my NCLEX study materials for the fourth hour in a row. I know I won't take the exam until after graduation, but I want to get a head start on preparing for it so I ace it.

The massive modern grandfather clock that hangs on the foyer wall ticks with religious predictability, grating on my nerves. And though I could go back to my wing of Killian's massive Seagate mansion for some peace and quiet, my snack of dry roasted edamame compels me to stay. Eating the crunchy snack straight from the bag as I stand at the kitchen island is about the only thing keeping me awake.

That's what happens after a week straight of clinicals followed by hours upon hours of studying from a dry textbook—even if the subject of medicine does fascinate me. Thankfully, this is my last semester of school. Then I'm off to a real nursing job, where I can put my education to practical use rather than pouring over tomes and sitting in class until my brain feels like it's made of cotton.

I want to be an ER nurse—a decision I made after floundering around in a general studies major for a year—because I've spent so much of my life helping patch up my brother and his men. I know I have an interest in it. Though I would prefer it if I only had to patch up strangers.

The bag of edamame crinkles as I reach in for another handful of my salty snack.

Then I jerk my fingers back as the front door slams open with such force I nearly jump out of my skin. The soft tick of the clock is drowned out by the urgent voices of several men, one of which is unmistakably my brother Killian's.

"Quinny!" he calls even as I let my textbook fall closed so I can go to the entry to see what the commotion is all about.

"I'm here," I answer, rounding the corner a moment later.

His green eyes—the same bright shade as mine—are sharp with intensity, his blond curls tousled as if he's been in another fight, and immediately, I start searching for signs of injury.

Natasha, my new sister-in-law and Killian's wife of less than two weeks, is halfway down the stairs by the time I step into the foyer. And it never ceases to surprise me how quick and quiet she is. But she's impossible to miss, as her striking features reflect the same concern as mine. Her pale skin, even whiter in her anxiety, juxtaposes her burgundy hair.

I don't think she's any happier about the tension in my brother's voice than I am.

And with this Italian conflict Killian refuses to tell me about getting uglier by the day, I've come to expect the worst. Since the day he came home covered in his own blood and stabbed so badly I genuinely thought he might die, I feel like I haven't been able to take a full breath.

Since then, the fighting has only gotten more violent, the men more in need of my medical attention than they ever have in the past. And each time that front door bursts open, I dread the possibility that I won't be able to help.

"I'm fine," Killian assures Natasha as she runs into his arms.

And she rises onto her toes to kiss him. I'm happy for my oldest brother, who seems completely in love with his new wife. It's impossible to overlook their intense connection. It's practically magnetic when they're in a room together.

I like my new sister-in-law a lot. And at the same time, seeing how happy they are together makes my heart twinge. Because I've started to wonder if I'll ever find that kind of love. Not because I'm too old for that or anything, but the man I've had a crush on since I first started even thinking about boys is completely off-limits.

My gaze shifts automatically to Lance, our foster brother and Killian's right-hand man, as my thoughts turn to him.

And my stomach plummets.

He's as agonizingly gorgeous as ever with his thick head of walnut-colored locks that fall into his blue eyes as deep as the sea. And he towers above every other man in the room. But his shirt is torn and covered in blood, and his palm is pressed to his chest as if to staunch the crimson flow.

Thankfully, he's still standing on his own two feet. Which means the wound is probably less lethal than the one Killian sustained. Then again, knowing Lance, he could be at death's door, and he would continue to suffer silently.

"What happened?" I demand, pointing to the office-turned-medical room I insisted Killian let me have after my fifth impromptu operation in the kitchen last month.

Since then, he's helped me turn it into a proper infirmary with a foot-pedal treatment table, a stainless-steel roller tray for my tools, and a bright ceiling-mounted medical light on an adjustable spring arm to make my work more manageable. I've made a practice of keeping my first-aid space stocked with the essentials for pain relief, anesthesia, disinfecting, and stitching up wounds.

And I'm intensely grateful for that now as I follow Lance down the hall.

"Knife fight," is all Killian gives me as he joins us, his arm still wrapped around Natasha's shoulders.

My heart flutters at the memory of how deep Killian was stabbed with a blade, and I hope I'm not in for another one of those today. Not with Lance. Stitching up ugly wounds? Now that, I can do all day long. But treating the injuries of the men I care so much about? Let's just say the hands-on experience is not worth the anxiety of my loved ones being hurt.

I hate that they risk their lives like they do.

Not that anyone asks me.

Or tells me much of anything, for that matter.

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It's no surprise that Killian's explanation lacks any useful information.

And of course, Lance doesn't say a word as he leads the way to my infirmary, his broad shoulders swaggering despite his injury. No one personifies the word masculine better than Lance. Even his surly silences and dangerous scowls make him seem more manly and tough in the sexiest way.

It wouldn't surprise me if he could kill a man with his pinky finger alone.

That combined with the fact that he's considerably older than me—thirty-six compared to my twenty-three years of age—not to mention, Killian is hell-bent on carving a less violent path for me considering our family's history of dying young, should be enough to remind me of why my foster brother is off-limits.

Never mind the fact that he's practically family.

Killian might hope that putting me through college will help me find a nice young man to settle down with, who will make money through legal means and won't bring me deeper into our family's mafia ways.

But to me, other men are like distant stars in the night sky—and Lance is the sun.

When he reaches for the nape of his neck to tug his T-shirt over his head, my mouth goes dry. He tosses the soiled fabric into the trash without even looking at his target. And though I know he took it off so I can get a better look at his injury, I can't help but admire the rest of him while I'm at it.

Every last inch of him is rippling with muscle, from his powerful shoulders and thickly muscled chest to the washboard eight-pack that tapers into a V before vanishing into his low-slung jeans. God, he's so gorgeous, it makes my chest ache and my cheeks flame.

And though the rest of Killian's men remained in the foyer, the room still suddenly feels crowded as my brother and Natasha step inside behind me.

"Sit," I order Lance, gesturing to the treatment table before I turn to wash my hands. That will give me the time I need to collect my unruly emotions as I sanitize.

It's honestly mortifying how much I like Lance. Because, as my brother's best friend and practically family himself, Lance no doubt sees me just like Killian does—as an annoying kid sister. At least, that's what my brother calls me.

But my relationship with Lance has never involved the familiar snarky back-and-forth I have with the rest of my brothers. Probably because I can barely look Lance in the eye without blushing over how hot he is. And his propensity toward silence makes our conversations brief more often than not.

I don't mind it, though. Even if it's a contrast to my four rowdy and typically carefree older brothers. Lance has always been quiet—or at least, he has ever since our parents picked him up off the streets when he was thirteen. My mother told me once that his tendency to brood is because he had a troubled past, though they never told me exactly what that means. And if they knew, they took his secret to the grave.

Unlike my three other brothers—Jamie, Finn, and Henry—who have all flown the nest and left the family business in Killian's hands in order to pursue their own interests, Lance has stayed close to home. As Killian's right-hand man, he's the one my brother calls when he needs a dirty job done right. In short, he's invaluable to the King family.

He's invaluable to me.

But in a much different way.

Taking a deep breath, I snap my latex gloves into place and turn back to Lance. And immediately, my cheeks start to flame once again.

His bloody hands are resting palms up in his lap, and he's not bothering to put pressure on the wound anymore. Which means his impressive pecs and the canvas of tattoos that cover his chest and shoulders are on full display.

Focus, Quinn, I scold myself, and I step between his knees to get a better look at his cut.

Several thick rivulets of blood trickle down his abs from the diagonal slash. A laceration that must be seven inches long and over a quarter inch deep. It definitely needs stitches.

My stress skyrockets when I see just how deep it is. Whoever he was fighting fully intended to kill him. And the thought of losing Lance is almost more painful than I can bear. Setting my jaw to stop myself from calling him a slew of names, the least of which would be idiot, I get to work thoroughly disinfecting the wound.

I know better than to offer him any form of local anesthetic. In the numerous times I've had to stitch Lance up, he's turned the offer down for every single one of them. He did when he broke his clavicle during a football game and the doctor had to set it. And I suspect it's for the same reason he doesn't drink or do drugs—though why he's so set against even painkillers for serious injuries, I'll likely never find out.

“Are you going to tell me why you're bleeding all over my table?” I ask softly as I work. “Who did this?”

“The Italians,” Killian says, speaking for Lance because we both know our foster brother won’t say it himself.

I’ve listened in on enough conversations between Killian and Lance to know the Italians are responsible for my brother’s lethal stab wound a few months back—and the death of Natasha’s parents. That’s why my brother has allied with the Russians to fight the Italian don. But I don’t know much more than that because Killian prefers to keep me in the dark.

“We should have barricaded the back door and kept more reinforcements at the front,” Killian adds, this time to Lance.

“The plan worked, didn’t it?” Lance counters, succinct as always.

“I did love seeing the look on that bastard’s face when he realized you were waiting for him...” My brother smirks, his expression cocky as I catch it from the corner of my eye.

And I have to bite my tongue as I thread my needle because no one wants to hear how little I like that they’re risking their lives for a battle that’s not technically theirs to fight. Sure, the Italians hurt Killian. But that’s only because he was protecting Natasha—not because they have a feud with our family.

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And from what I understand, that's still the case.

I just hate the danger my brother and Lance are always putting themselves in.

To calm my growing temper, I focus on the task at hand, sliding the curved needle into Lance's ink-stained flesh. And he doesn't even flinch. Like he's made of granite, he sits perfectly still as they continue to discuss what happened. Killian in his devil-may-care fashion, while Lance answers with curt yet insightful observations.

Then, as I tie off my fourth stitch, the infirmary door slams open. I grind my teeth, ready to strangle the beautiful dark-haired woman that stalks in because she nearly made me stab Lance with the needle by accident.

But Natasha's older sister, Tatiana, hardly seems to notice my presence as she sweeps into the room to demand, "What happened? That wasn't the plan we agreed upon at all."

And the temperature in the room drops ten degrees as she stares my brother down with a cold fury that could shatter stone.

2

LANCE

"Hey, when shit hits the fan, sometimes, you need to improvise," Killian says, giving his signature smirk as he takes Tatiana on.

Tucked beneath his arm, Natasha stiffens, her delicate features drawing into a line of tension, and I suspect it's because Killian's new wife doesn't like him arguing with her older sister—even if our alliance is rather fresh on the coattails of an extended feud.

But that's the Kings for you. Always brazenly making their opinions known. It's a family trait—stirring things up with controversial statements and to see where things stand once the dust settles. And while I don't mind it, as his right-hand man, it does make my job of protecting Killian a hell of a lot harder sometimes.

It's also partly what makes Killian such a force to be reckoned with.

No one can predict him.

Which often leaves his opponents unsteady on their feet. And apparently, his allies as well.

“You weren't where you said you'd be, and that nearly cost us the mission!” Tatiana insists, crossing her arms and making her already impressive amount of cleavage even more prominent over her flattering peacock-blue silk wrap dress.

The Sokolov girls might be known for their beauty and feminine charms, but since they came bursting into our lives like a wrecking ball, I've learned that their public appearance is little more than a thin veneer to hide their true intellect and lethal skills. Still, I can see why they're considered the most stunning sisters in New York. They're true Russian beauties—even if neither of the distinctly different sisters are particularly my type of woman.

“Hey, it was your guys who missed the shot,” Killian says. “You should be thanking us for coming in to clean up the mess...” he insists, gesturing to me since I'm the one who technically stepped in and took a knife for the trouble.

Tatiana counters with her own perspective on what went wrong, but I've lost interest in the conversation. We got the job done with minimal injuries and no casualties on our side—Russian or Irish. That's all that matters.

As soon as Quinn is done stitching me, we'll be up and running once again.

The slight tug on my skin reminds me of her progress. Not the most pleasant sensation, but one I've grown accustomed to over the years.

I glance down to see how far along she is in sewing me back together, and I catch a glimpse of her intent face. A smattering of freckles colors her button nose, contrasting the crease between her strawberry-blond brows that appears whenever she's concentrating.

Her lips thin slightly as she maintains intense focus. They've always been a soft peach color and create a perfectly feminine bow shape even now. Her green eyes darken from jade to emerald when she frowns—a detail I've picked up on over the lifetime I've known her. It fascinates me the way her eyes change color, and something about it draws me in, giving me something to think about when the pain threatens to take control.

Sometime between entering the foyer and following me into the infirmary, Quinn took the time to pull her thick head of blond curls back into a messy bun—a sanitary practice she no doubt acquired during her time in nursing school. But a few strands have slipped free to fall around her face. She ignores them studiously as she works, and I follow her gaze as I turn my attention to her hands.

Hands that never cease to amaze me. Even in the chaos of the situation, they're steady and confident. She stitches me up with deft precision, each knot perfectly spaced and tied with the right tension, the needle sliding in and out of my skin so smoothly it's almost painless.

And still, Quinn's touch remains incredibly tender. One gloved hand stabilizes the two separated pieces of my chest as the other guides the curved sliver of stainless steel. She's turned sewing flesh into an art form.

She didn't bother trying to convince me to use local anesthetic this time, and that makes a smile tug at my lips. She's probably given up because I've refused it every time she's offered.

It's not that I wouldn't trust her to numb me properly. I trust her completely—even concerning Killian's survival. After all, I brought him here when he was on death's door, not to a hospital, because I knew Quinn wouldn't let him die.

But I like to be in control of every aspect of my life. After the childhood I endured—being abandoned by my parents when I was eight—I spent years living on the street, just trying to stay alive.

I've known extreme hunger, had everything taken from me countless times at knifepoint, gunpoint, or worse. I've had the snot beat out of me for the comfort of a tattered, flea-infested, filthy mattress. As a child, I survived countless situations that proved just how helpless and weak I was—how vulnerable that left me.

Never again.

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I won't let my strength fail me anymore.

I would rather die than survive like that.

The Kings rescued me, after five years of fighting tooth and nail to live as a gutter rat. For that, I will be forever grateful to their family. Indebted really. And now that I've learned what it means to take life by the balls, I will never be a victim of it again. Not even to something as trivial as the pain of stitches.

"You're not the only one with men to think of here!" Tatiana shouts, her commanding voice slicing through my errant thoughts and bringing me back to their argument.

I glance in her direction to ensure she's not demonstrating any violent tendencies before turning my eyes back to Quinn's talented hands. Not that I really expect Natasha's sister to get physical. Natasha might know how to handle herself in a fight—I've seen the younger Sokolov sister throw knives with lethal precision. But Tatiana's skill is in her intellect.

And though I would follow Killian into any battle, I can't deny that Tatiana's tactical intelligence is unparalleled. She's not wrong. If her men had held up their end of the plan she put in place, I wouldn't have had to step in at the end and we all could have made it out without a scratch. But strategy and planning wasn't where the scheme fell short.

"Well, maybe that's the problem," Killian counters, voicing my opinion. "You're so focused on your men, you haven't taken into account what happens when my men

have to finish the job you can't. You need better men. Reliable men."

"I'm sorry. Are you blaming this on me?" Tatiana asks, waving in my direction. "Because it kind of sounded like that when you're the one who jumped the gun. I told you to hang back, and look what happened because you can't listen?—"

"Enough!" Natasha insists, cutting her sister off as she steps out of Killian's arms. "We're on the same side here. Remember? And let's not forget that the mission was successful—even if it didn't go off without a hitch. The only way we're going to work together is if we stop squabbling and find a way to do it better next time."

"I'm fine," I insist because I know Killian's going to bat for me as much as he is to antagonize Tatiana. And while he might enjoy razzing the young pakhansha, I can tell she's stressed over her new reign.

I suspect it's because she's having a hard time keeping her father's men in line. They seem less inclined to respect her command since she's a woman—even if she's clearly more intelligent than the majority of the men I've seen in charge. But I recognize the dissent in her ranks that wasn't there under her father's rule.

It's not a surprise in our male-dominant world.

They probably don't like taking orders from a woman. And though I would have no issue with it, especially considering how spot-on her strategies have been, I don't doubt they consider it emasculating. Typical Bratva men.

As far as I'm aware, she's the first female mafia boss of any kind in New York.

And her ascension happened both unexpectedly and after the brutal murder of her parents, without her father announcing her succession. None of which has helped her

claim.

Quinn casts me a look that says she disagrees with my assessment that I'm fine. But I've had worse and survived. It was a clean cut. The guy didn't pierce any vital organs, and with her expertise, I'll be as good as new in no time.

"All I'm saying is Lance wouldn't have been hurt at all if you'd let me manage my men," Tatiana gripes.

"And all I'm saying is we handled it so Lucian's captain couldn't slip through our fingers. Again. You're welcome." Killian flashes a wolfish grin.

As they fall into another bout of bickering, I roll my eyes and turn my attention to Quinn as a distraction. "How's school going?" I ask.

It's my default question for her because if there's one subject I know will get her talking, it's nursing. And I enjoy hearing about her passion. No one talks quite like Quinn—it's as if her cup is brimming with enthusiasm, and whenever someone takes the time to share in her interest, that zeal overflows until the room is bursting with vibrant energy.

"This last semester just might kill me," she admits, her hands never pausing their work. But her lips curl into a smile that tells me she loves it all the same. "Between the hours doing clinicals and studying for the NCLEX, I think the term 'exhaustion' has taken on a whole new meaning. But the information is fascinating, and I'm enjoying the NICU a lot more than I thought I would. I'm excited to graduate, though, and start putting my degree to use."

"Aren't you doing that already?" I ask, glancing pointedly at her hands.

Quinn laughs, the bubbly sound effortless and melodic. And it fills the room with a

levity that breaks the growing tension in Tatiana's corner.

"You have a point," Quinn says, her smile radiant as she ties off her final knot and snips the thread.

"What's funny?" Killian asks, turning his attention to us and ending the squabble.

"Lance was just pointing out that I'm already putting my nursing degree to use." Quinn applies antiseptic ointment to my wound with a light, delicate touch that sends a shiver down my spine. Then she follows it up by applying a square of gauze that she tapes over my perfectly symmetrical stitches.

"You better not be trying to convince her to stay on after she graduates," Killian warns.

Color pools in Quinn's cheeks, and she glances up through her thick lashes to meet my eyes momentarily. Then she drops her gaze back to the bandage she's taking extra care to secure.

I just shake my head. I wouldn't dare ask that of her.

"Good," Killian says, pulling Natasha back into his arms.

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And I turn my gaze back to my nurse. I realize Quinn was meant for greater things than patching up our sorry lot. Though, I'll miss having her around when she does get a full-time job. Knowing she's here to put us back together has made it much easier to take risks because she's been doing it for so many years now. She was doing it even before she graduated high school.

And I'll never trust my life in anyone else's hands quite like I do Quinn's. Something about her presence makes the King household feel that much safer, more dependable—like a home, really.

She'll leave behind a sizable hole when she goes.

But that's no excuse to hold her back.

Quinn deserves the world, and I sincerely want that for her. Even if it means we'll be losing a guardian angel with a healer's touch. I know Killian feels the same way about his little sister, regardless of how he teases her. That's just his way of showing affection. He might refer to her as his annoying kid sister, but to be honest, she's the most mature out of all of us.

And we've been blessed to have Quinn around for as long as we have.

There's just something about her—something about her presence I can't quite put my finger on. It's been there from the very start.

When the Kings first picked me up off the streets—after my failed attempt to pickpocket Killian's father—Quinn hadn't even been born yet. But her entrance into

the family brought a sense of joy and laughter that the four rough-housing King boys didn't possess.

She made the family softer, more gentle. They were always kind. After all, they took in a filthy, ragged street urchin like me and gave me a warm bed and three square meals a day—all out of the goodness of their hearts.

But when Quinn arrived, it was like witnessing a miracle. Everything changed the day Mrs. King brought that tiny bundle home in her arms. And even now, Quinn brings sunshine with her into any room she enters.

She'll make an incredible nurse because of it.

"There, you're all set," she says, her smile lighting her eyes as they rise to meet mine.

For one suspended moment, it almost feels like she can pluck my thoughts right from my mind. It's probably the only way she'll ever know them, because voicing my mind has always felt like a monumental task. I prefer to keep things close to the vest—to better protect myself, or so I learned on the streets.

But Quinn's one of the few people I know I could trust completely.

Maybe someday I'll tell her how I feel.

In the meantime, I suspect she knows more than she lets on. Because her cheeks color self-consciously, and her eyes drop, breaking our silent connection.

One of the things that drew me toward health care to begin with was my insatiable curiosity. Because my father never spoke business in front of me—or at least he tried not to because my mom hated it. All of it. If it were up to her, I don't doubt she would have preferred to live in squalor knowing my father and brothers would be safe. And I wanted to know about the world he tried so hard to keep me isolated from.

But like my father, Killian is drawn to the game of strategy that is ruling the Irish Kings. In my brother's mind, New York is just one big chessboard. Only each borough has its own king or queen and army to manipulate.

Unlike my father, though, Killian saw the value in my ability to patch him and his men up without the legal ramifications that can come with going to a hospital after an illegal shootout. And that meant, by my first year of college, I finally realized my family isn't in the shipping industry. Not the legal kind of shipping anyway.

Still, listening in on conversations over sutures has been my best source of information when it comes to my brother's dealings, because he doesn't want me to fall into a life of crime any more than our father did.

Ironically, considering that their nefarious means of making money is what put me through college. It's what continues to put a roof over my head and food in my belly.

And eventually, my brother has gotten comfortable enough to talk business in my presence that he even lets it trickle into dinner conversation every now and again. Tonight, however, tension permeates the room as we eat our steak, potatoes, and creamed spinach.

I glance silently toward the head of the table as forks and knives clatter over our dinner plates. Once upon a time, my father occupied that chair. With my mom to his left and Killian to his right. Now Natasha sits to Killian's left, Lance on his right.

And because it puts butterflies in my stomach whenever I sit too close to Lance, I've taken up residence in the chair beside my brother's new wife.

She eats delicately, cutting her perfectly cooked filet mignon into small bites before sliding each piece between her full lips and pearly teeth. Her sister didn't stay for dinner—probably because Tatiana and Killian can't seem to occupy the same space for more than five minutes without arguing.

But Natasha still looks tense, reflecting the same growing frustration building in my chest, tightening like an iron fist around my heart. Only Lance seems perfectly at ease in the notable silence.

Killian keeps casting glances toward his wife, as if anticipating the impending explosion. "Just say it," he says finally, setting his fork and knife down on his plate as he turns his full attention toward his Russian bride.

Natasha sighs, setting her knife and fork down as well before interlacing her fingers and placing her elbows on the table. "I'm just tired of the fighting. I'd hoped we would have avenged my father by now—without turning it into a full-on war. But Don Lucian has such good reinforcements...It doesn't matter what you or Tatiana throw at him. This isn't the right angle, and you know it."

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Killian's expression darkens, and Lance looks up from his food, suddenly interested in the conversation at hand.

"He has been harder to kill than anticipated," Killian concedes. "But in the meantime, our combined forces are putting a dent in his business—and his pride."

"I know. I just..." Natasha trails off, and for a moment, I think she might bring up the fact that Killian and his men are risking their lives for a fight I wouldn't consider theirs at all.

But she doesn't. Instead, she just shakes her head, as if at a loss for what to say next.

And in the silence that follows, my building frustration bursts from me before I can't rein it in. "Maybe it's time you stop risking your life—and your men's—to avenge someone else's father," I blurt. "Haven't you done enough, Killian?"

I almost pull Lance into the conversation, to use him as an example of the kind of loss we might sustain in Killian's attempt to lessen Natasha's devastation. But nothing is going to bring her father back, and we have so much to lose if things go wrong. It seems foolhardy to waste lives avenging one man's death.

Before I can say anything else, though, Killian cuts me off. "You wouldn't understand, Quinn. Because Father and I have both intentionally chosen to keep you out of the mafia business for a reason. But helping the Sokolovs isn't just about avenging Boris. Survival in this business means alliances, and Tatiana needs our support. If the tables were turned, she would be risking her men for ours."

“From the sound of it, she’s not even risking her men’s lives to protect yours when you’re fightingherfight!” I insist, my temper rising. “Lance could have died today, and for what? Toput a hit on some captain because you can’t get access to Lucian? What’s the end goal here, Killian? Have you really considered the price you might have to pay while you’re playing allies?”

“That’s enough,” Killian commands, his eyes flashing.

I tip my jaw up petulantly, fighting the urge to cry. He’s acting like this has nothing to do with me. Like his decision to wage war doesn’t affect me. But my brother’s not the one who has to put each of his wounded men back together after one of his fights.

He’s so focused on proving his mettle. At this point, I genuinely think he’s disregarding the risks in the hopes that he can ease Natasha’s pain. Meanwhile, I’ll be the one who pays the ultimate price. Because Killian and Lance are the two people I care about most in this world, and I don’t want to lose them to satisfy his—or the Sokolovs’—overdeveloped sense of vengeance.

“Maybe Quinn has a point,” Natasha cuts in, surprising us all.

Three sets of eyes snap to look at her determined expression, and my lips part in shock.

“I know you don’t like it, but maybe it’s time for me to get involved,” she says, meeting Killian’s eyes directly. “The most logical plan would be for me to take care of the don myself. It’s how my family has handled situations like this in the past. It’s what my father would have done if he were in charge. And though I know you and Tatiana are more nervous about it after everything that’s happened, I think it’s time we reopen the possibility for discussion.”

Natasha’s slender shoulders are square, her chin lifted with regal conviction. And

though I have no clue what she means by “taking care of the don herself,” I can tell Killian does. And he’s not happy about it.

“Absolutely not,” he says, clenching his jaw until the tendons pop beneath his skin. “It’s far too risky.”

“Killian, I’ve trained my whole life for this kind of situation. I can help?—”

“This is different,” he counters fiercely. “You’ve never successfully dealt with a man as high up as Lucian before. What if he has the same level of training I do?”

Once again, I sense that I’ve been left out of a larger discussion. It’s as if Killian and Natasha are holding an entire second conversation within their argument—one I’m not privy to but am burning to know more about.

I glance at Lance, wishing he might step in and lend some assistance, or clarity. Maybe break the tension building between my brother and his wife. But I should know better than to expect Lance to back down from a fight.

His steady gaze meets mine with a gravity that knots my stomach. And he shakes his head ever so slightly, confirming that, in this, he’s not going to be on my side. I don’t know if he always aligns with Killian or if he simply feels obligated to back my brother as his right-hand man. But he rarely questions my brother’s decisions, even when I see thoughts churning behind his deep ocean-blue eyes.

“The Italians need to be put in their place,” he states firmly, his low baritone rumbling through the room like a death knell. “They nearly killed Killian. They need to understand that no one threatens a King and lives. It doesn’t matter if their target was the Sokolov sisters. No one touches Killian.”

It’s about as impressive of a speech as I’ve ever heard Lance give, and my shoulders

slump. Killian won't listen to reason if Lance is on his side. The two are impossible to discourage once they've joined forces. No matter how reckless.

Natasha seems to realize it, too, and she slumps into her chair before casting me a gloomy look. One that shares in my misery.

Lance might not be verbose, but when he speaks, he delivers a sense of finality to conversations that shuts down the debate completely. The silence that follows confirms it, and I bite my tongue.

My tears threaten to spill over because my concern isn't going to sway them—even if Lance's argument proves the very point I'm trying to make. Killian risked his life to protect Natasha that night, and once again, he's using himself as her sword and shield. With no regard to his own safety—let alone Lance's. And of course, Lance still thinks he's invincible, even with thirty-seven stitches in his chest.

It's only a small comfort to see Natasha is as unhappy about it as I am.

Though, I'm curious what she thinks she could possibly do to deal with Lucian that none of the countless King and Sokolov men haven't tried already. And the silent exchange she and my brother share only intensifies my desire to know.

"It's settled, then," Killian says, reading the quiet room as concession.

My heart sinks as I realize nothing I say or do is going to keep my family out of harm. My brother is going to do what he thinks is best. No matter the consequences.

4

QUINN

It's a quiet breakfast—not because of last night's tension but because Killian and Natasha are most likely making up for their squabble by staying in bed together later this morning.

Which means I ate my meal of fresh-cut fruit and scrambled eggs alone.

Not that I mind.

I brought a textbook for company.

And as I head back toward my wing of the house, anatomy facts chase each other in circles around my brain.

I'm so immersed in locking the information down, I almost didn't notice that the door to the home gym is open. But the labored grunts are unmistakable. And while I know I shouldn't, I can't help but take a peek. Because I know the sounds Lance makes when he works out.

And after the number of stitches I put in him yesterday, he shouldn't be straining himself.

Not that I believed for a second he would take it easy.

That's just not his way.

Careful to stay hidden, I peer around the corner of the door until I find him at the pull-up bar. He has his ankles crossed, his strong fingers wrapped around the bar as he does one chin-up, two, then three in a matter of seconds.

Mesmerized by the fluid motion, I can't bring myself to look away.

He makes it look effortless—like an everyday person might treat the act of standing from a seat. From this angle, I can see the sweat glistening on his bare torso. The ripple of his abs every time his arms flex. His shoulders bulge, his biceps forming mountainous muscles laced with prominent veins.

His breaths escape in rushed huffs, matching the impressive rhythm of his workout. And the dark chestnut color of his hair is almost black as sweat makes it cling to his forehead. It's been a long time since I've watched Lance work out. Not since he moved out of my parents' Brooklyn estate.

It's no surprise that his routine has grown more impressive. But the sight of him in nothing but gym shorts and running shoes, glistening from exertion makes me forget momentarily about why I stopped to look in.

I just can't help myself.

Seeing Lance in his full godlike glory makes my stomach flip and my mouth go dry. The temperature of my body must increase ten degrees in a matter of moments as I think about what it would be like to touch that perfection. To run my hands over his washboard abs.

Swallowing hard, I force my gaze to the square patch of white gauze covering his right pec muscle. Because I actually stopped to make sure he wasn't pushing himself

hard enough to blow his stitches. No red is seeping through the bandage, which is good. But he better change it at the very least when he's done.

I contemplate whether I ought to barge in and mother him by telling him to do so. But I'm not sure I could do that without blushing. In fact, my face is hot just watching from this side of the door. So, rather than try to scold him into taking care of himself, I take a deep, steadying breath and close my eyes in order to break the spell he puts me under every time I look his way.

It's a lot easier to think straight when I'm not watching his impressive workout routine. And I know now that it was the right choice to leave him be. But as I take a step back, ready to slip away, the floorboard gives a terrible creaking groan.

I freeze, my eyes flying open as I pray that Lance didn't hear me.

But he must have because his head snaps in my direction.

Holding my breath, I spin away from the door, praying he didn't see me. Then, as quietly as I can, I make a run for it, sprinting back to my room before he can catch me watching him.

Dear God, the only thing more embarrassing than blushing as I try to mother a man over a decade my senior would be if he caught me ogling him.

I shouldn't have indulged in watching Lance—even if I did it to ensure he doesn't push his workout too far and bust his sutures.

At least that's what I keep telling myself to feel better about it.

Deep down, I know the truth.

I shouldn't have a crush on him like I do. I just can't seem to help it. Try as I might to overcome my feelings for Lance, it's proven a harder obstacle than I ever would have imagined. And believe me, I've tried.

For years, I've worked on banishing him from my fantasies. And still, every time he turns up unexpectedly to join us for dinner or to pick Killian up, my heart does one of those crazy somersaults. My stomach fills with butterflies. And my pulse breaks into a full-on sprint.

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Once again, I'm thrown into the deep end of my emotions.

And every time, it takes me ages to wade back out onto the dry, barren land of my abstinence. The island of virginity that I will likely occupy all on my own until the day I die because I've never wanted anyone the way I want Lance. And he's never once given me an indication that my feelings might be reciprocated.

Still, as I reach my room and slam the door closed behind me, I can't wipe the image of his half-naked perfection from my mind. What I wouldn't give to have his strong arms wrapped around me. To taste the salt of his sweat on my tongue.

Heat radiates through my body as I imagine his bare, sweat-slicked chest pressed against mine, his lips kissing me. I wonder if his five-o'clock shadow would tickle my skin—or maybe it would be rough like sandpaper.

I swallow hard as I envision his big hands roaming over my body, feeling my curves, daring to touch me the way no man ever has.

And a deep, throbbing ache starts to grow between my thighs.

I don't think he caught me watching him, because he would have made it to my room by now if he had. Right?

And in the silent solitude that follows, I feel the intense urge to alleviate that pulsing need.

Padding across the floor in my bare feet, I settle onto my bed, then fall back across

my mattress. I've lost count of how many times I've fantasized about Lance. But something about seeing him in the gym today has completely shattered my self-control.

I so desperately want to know what his lips would feel like against mine.

To have his hands touching me.

And without thinking about it, I reach between my thighs. My soft, mini olive-green smock dress slides up my legs as I bend my knees, granting me better access. When I run my fingers over my lace panties, I can feel my excitement through the fabric.

Warmth creeps up from my chest to pool in my cheeks as I imagine Lance running his fingers over my panties, pushing them aside at the same time as I do.

I gasp at how wet I am over just that glimpse of him all sweaty and straining in his workout. The perfection of his muscles. The tantalizing V that guides me to what he hides beneath his gym shorts.

Plenty of my friends at school have talked about what it feels like to be with a man. And of course, I understand the anatomy of it. As a nurse, that's a basic part of my education.

But knowing what it would feel like to become one with Lance...

I've never actually seen...well, all of him. But considering the rest of him, I imagine he's rather large. And I wonder if he and I would even fit together. At five foot five, I'm average height for a girl. While he's...anything but average.

Fire floods my veins when I picture him leaning over me, pressing his lips to mine as he aligns with me and slides inside of me for the first time. I gasp as my fingers

follow the motion I fantasize about his cock performing, easing into my hot entrance.

Relief bubbles in my veins as I take my slick juices and stroke upward until the pads of my wet fingers find my clit. And I slowly start to circle, swirling my excitement around the sensitive nub. All the while, images of Lance's muscular body wrapped around mine flood my mind.

I moan at the thought of him naked with me, his skin brushing against mine.

Would he be gentle with me? Or take me with the brutal determination with which he seems to go about every task in his life? I'm not sure which I might like more. But the idea of him wanting me so desperately that he couldn't hold back makes my clit throb and my pussy tighten.

And suddenly, I'm on the brink of climax, my orgasm hovering on a precipice I might topple over at any moment. My muscles tense, my need for release so intense it makes my back arch up off the bed. I roll my hips as my fingers continue their frantic circle.

But what launches me into euphoria is the thought of Lance coming with me—his desire for me so intense that we find our release together, wrapped in each other's arms. I shudder, my legs jerking together as my clit pulses against my fingers.

I suck in sharp lungfuls of air, astonished by how turned on I was and how quickly I came.

Then again, it's been a long time since I've spent this much time in close proximity to Lance. And yesterday, I was actually touching the hard muscles of his chest, though I used every ounce of self-control to focus on stitching him up, rather than how strong he felt even after sustaining such an injury.

Not to mention, the latex gloves gave me a bit of a barrier. They made it feel more clinical. Still, I couldn't escape that distinctly masculine scent of leather, gunpowder, and a hint of coppery sweat that surrounds him. And though I suspect that's just his natural musk, given his environment, I find it ridiculously enticing.

God, I'm hopeless.

Letting my feet slip off the edge of the bed, I lie on my back staring up at the ceiling, reveling in just how pathetic my life has become. Sure, nursing is a noble profession—one I'm excited to begin. But my personal life is all but nonexistent. I don't spend time with friends. I don't date. I can't even remember the last man I tried to flirt with—or who attempted to flirt with me.

And all the while, I might just be hung up indefinitely on someone who's not just my brother's best friend but my own foster brother—a man who's too old for me anyway.

What is wrong with me?

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I yelp, the question fleeing my mind as someone pounds adamantly on my bedroom door. I jump nearly a foot in the air as I panic, thinking they might come in while I'm still in a state of disarray.

"Coming!" I call, scrambling to my feet. I quickly straighten my dress and attempt fruitlessly to cool the heat in my cheeks. I will myself to get it together so whoever it is won't realize that I was jilling myself off in the bedroom.

And when I open the door, I find Lance standing there in all his sweaty glory.

Scowling.

My heart stops.

Oh God, did he actually catch me watching him?

5

LANCE

Quinn's door jerks open with surprising force, and for a moment, I'm struck dumb by the sudden sight of her. She looks uncharacteristically frazzled, her cheeks flushed beneath her adorable freckles, her wild curls forming a golden halo around her face.

Her Cupid's bow lips are parted slightly, her breaths coming fast, as if I interrupted her mid-workout, and I wonder if she might have been doing yoga or something in her room.

Then again, she's wearing a loose-fitting dress, so I doubt it. My eyes track down her body to more thoroughly assess her outfit. And as I confirm my observation, I accidentally take note of the fact that she fills out the green, knee-length dress better than she might have in the past.

It strikes me suddenly that she's grown into a beautiful young woman—one that any man would find attractive. Between her big, green, color-changing eyes and her perfectly shaped lips, I don't doubt she has many eligible men pursuing her, and that makes my brow furrow.

I shouldn't be thinking about Quinn like that.

I push the thought from my mind with a reminder that she's my best friend's little sister—and that's all she'll ever be to me, so I can't entertain observations about how appealing she might be.

"Lance..." she gasps, clearly surprised by my presence.

And the breathy sound of her voice wreaks havoc inside my chest.

I can hardly say I blame her for being caught off guard. I'm not normally here at this time of day, but I stayed late last night to discuss new tactics with Killian that might get us closer to Don Lucian, so rather than drive back to my Brooklyn Heights penthouse, I decided to spend the night.

"W-what's up?" she asks, her cheeks flushing a darker shade of pink—likely because I never seek her out in her private wing of the house.

I'm usually better about respecting her personal space.

And I wouldn't bother her now if it weren't necessary.

But like an idiot, I decided to use the Kings' home gym before going to work today—a habit I formed as a teenager. And because I refuse to acknowledge my current limits enforced by my injury, I ended up busting a few of the perfect stitches Quinn gave me yesterday. So, frustrated with myself for ruining her hard work, I came to seek her out, hoping she might have time to sew me back up.

“I messed up.” Grasping one corner of the gauze square, I pull it back to show her the damage I did.

“Lance!” she scolds, her frazzled expression vanishing in an instant to be replaced by that all-too-familiar flash of frustration.

Secretly, I love this side of Quinn.

She's a force to be reckoned with when she's angry. And more often than not, she's riled up about something Killian did—and therefore, me by extension. But as angry as she can get, and as impressive as her lectures can be, I still find her temperendearing. Because she only ever scolds us about being reckless, endangering ourselves unnecessarily.

Quinn's the cutest kind of protective over her big brothers. Killian most of all.

Which is another reason I intend to keep him alive at all costs.

I know that losing him would crush her.

And I never want to witness the kind of devastation she and Killian experienced over their parents' deaths again.

“What happened?” she demands, peeling the bandage off completely to more closely inspect my chest.

“Pull-ups.”

Quinn tsks, her cheeks flushing a deeper shade of red in her fury. “How are you that careless? How many times have I told you to take it easy until the stitches come out? Especially when they’re on a muscle like this. You’re lucky you didn’t do worse damage.”

“Sorry,” I grunt, but my lips threaten to tug into a smile at her lecture. I’ve heard it all before.

“Well, you should be. I don’t know why I even bother trying to minimize your scars.” Quinn purses her lips, her green eyes flashing as she glares up at me. “You’re all sweaty. I can’t stitch you up like this. Go wash off. You can use my shower. Just try to avoid getting your stitches wet as best you can. I’ll clean them when you come out.”

“Thanks, Quinn.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She tosses me a clean towel from her closet then busies herself in her dresser, looking for the tools she’ll need to fix my sutures.

Wordlessly, I head into her en suite bathroom, closing the door behind me. It’s the first time I’ve set foot this far inside her personal space, and I glance around, taking in the clean countertop, the crisp, modern decor. She keeps her area tidy, and I like that. It reinforces her attention to detail and meticulous personality.

The shower’s sleek, with a clear glass door and white tiles laced with a thin ribbon of

gray covering the walls. I rinse off quickly, not bothering to wait for the water to get warm.

As I use her floral body wash, I realize that the hint of rose and strawberry I smell on her sometimes is from her soap. It's nice. Refreshing. Shockingly appealing, honestly. And as warm and comforting as her presence.

It makes me more intensely aware that she's just on the other side of that door, waiting for me in her bedroom. Maybe it was a bad idea to come find her. But if I didn't, I'd either have to go to the hospital to get patched up or face her wrath at the end of the day, after my skin had time to get good and angry and possibly infected.

No. Better to deal with any awkwardness now than face Quinn's true fury.

Turning off the water just as the shower finally reaches a comfortable temperature, I step out onto the plush bath mat. Grabbing the clean towel, I run it over my head a few times to wick away the worst of the moisture. Then I pat myself dry, avoiding the thin rivulets of blood that have started to trail down from my busted stitches onto my stomach.

I wrap the towel around my waist, keeping it low enough that I hopefully won't stain it before Quinn can clean me up. Then I comb my hair out of my eyes and open the door to step back into her bedroom.

"Oh! God..." she gasps as she turns from her dresser and nearly spills the handful of medical supplies at my unexpected appearance.

"Sorry," I grunt again and secure her grip on the bundle until she's regained her composure.

"No, you're fine. I just...didn't realize you were there." Her blush makes her freckles

stand out once more, accentuating the delicate shape of her button nose, and Quinn juts her sharp chin toward the vanity near her window. “Let’s work over there. I’ll have better light.”

Releasing her hands, I follow her to the window and watch as she organizes her tools on the vanity’s surface.

“Let me just...wash my hands,” she says and quickly disappears into the bathroom.

As I wait, I take in my surroundings, once again making note of the neat state of her room. She’s made her bed. All her clothes are hung or folded and put away. And the only clutter is on her desk, where she has a massive stack of medical textbooks piled nearly as high as the top of her computer monitor.

Half the words along their spine, I couldn’t even be sure I would pronounce right. And my respect for Killian’s little sister intensifies at the reminder of just how smart she is to be graduating with a nursing degree in just over a month.

“Okay,” Quinn says, entering the room once again.

Her eyes scan down my body, taking in the towel wrapped around my waist, and I wonder if she’d intended for me to put my sweaty shorts back on. Perhaps that would have been more decent of me.

But it’s too late now, and she doesn’t ask me to before she wets a gauze pad with sanitary solution and dabs along my stitches. She’s not wearing gloves today—likely because her bedroom isn’t as well stocked as the medical room Killian made for her. And her fingers are feather light as they brush across my throbbing cut, soothing it even as the antiseptic makes it sting.

Quickly, she swipes another clean gauze pad over my abs to wipe away the rest of my

mess, and she tosses each spent item into the waste bin beside her desk.

This time, she stitches me up with a fabric sewing needle, but if the thread's different, I can't tell. Within a matter of minutes, she's resealed my cut—albeit using an alternate angle that's not quite as symmetrical as before. But this way, the thread avoids exacerbating the angry skin I tore by overexerting myself.

“Now, do not—I repeat, do not—push it like that again for a week. Okay?” she demands as she slathers a fresh layer of antibiotic ointment over the wound. “If you do, I'm not stitching you up a third time. I'll drag your butt to the hospital and demand you pay for a doctor to lecture you about proper suture care instead.”

I chuckle, amusement over her empty threat making it impossible to keep a straight face. “Yes, ma'am,” I say, and I gather my gym shorts from her bathroom on my way toward the door.

“You know to change that bandage at least once a day, right?” she confirms, though she's given me dressing instructions more times than I can count.

Turning, with my hand on the doorknob, I nod.

“Good. I want to keep an eye on it to make sure those broken stitches don't get infected. Stop by tomorrow.”

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Again, I give a curt nod. Then I turn and open the door.

And come face-to-face with Killian.

Surprise registers in his eyes, and his head jerks back as he takes in my freshly showered appearance, the towel wrapped around my waist. And for the first time, I get a glimpse of what it would look like to be on the receiving end of his ire.

“What the hell are you doing half-naked in Quinn’s room?” he demands.

6

QUINN

If looks could kill, Lance would have dropped dead at my threshold. Because Killian is scowling at him like he just farted in my brother’s Cheerios. Heat floods my cheeks at the unexpectedly awkward moment. And from the look on Killian’s face, I can confirm what I’ve always suspected—that he would not approve of me and Lance together.

Not that I thought for a moment that it would become a real possibility.

I know Lance doesn’t think of me that way.

But I need to intercede before things go sideways, so I rush forward to step between them.

“It’s my fault,” I insist, placing my palms on my brother’s chest as I try to refocus his attention on me.

And it works. His eyes snap down to meet mine, his expression thunderous but far less deadly.

“Lance was being an idiot and busted his stitches working out,” I explain, rolling my eyes and exaggerating my tone in an attempt to bring some levity to the situation. “He was all sweaty and gross, so I made him shower before I put him back together. No point in stitching him up if the wound’s just going to get infected.”

Killian’s expression softens slightly, the tension releasing from his shoulders. And the fire calms in his green eyes until they’re closer to their normal spark of mischief.

But my mouth keeps running because I just can’t seem to help myself. “You know, I should disown the both of you for being so reckless. Seriously, I can’t go a single day without having to patch one or the other of you up. One of these days, I’m going to make you learn how to suture yourselves so I can put my time to better use helping patients who have reasonable survival instincts—or any at all, really. Patients who don’t need constant attention.”

Killian laughs and pulls me into a protective side hug so I’m facing Lance once more. “Oh, come on. You’d miss it if you couldn’t use us as your pincushions,” he chides.

Lance releases a low chuckle that makes my stomach somersault, and his impossibly blue eyes meet mine for just a moment. Then he turns his attention back to Killian. “I’ll go change. Then I’m ready to get to work.”

Killian jerks his chin in a single nod of silent agreement, and Lance slips past me, gym shorts balled in one hand, his other firmly holding the towel around his waist closed. And though his broad shoulders and muscular back draw my eyes, I rip them

away because I don't want Killian to catch me ogling our foster brother.

"I'm heading into town for a bit of shopping today," I announce, looking for any excuse to get past the uncomfortable situation.

Killian frowns, his arm slipping from around my shoulders as he turns to face me. "I'd rather you stay inside the grounds until things settle down with the Italians."

"I'm not going to put my life on pause over every squabble you get involved in," I insist, crossing my arms. "I'd never earn my degree if I stopped leaving the house whenever you pissed someone off."

Killian chuckles and tips his head from side to side. "Fair point well made. At least take a guard. This conflict with the Italians puts us all at risk right now."

I roll my eyes. "Don't be silly. You're being too overprotective. Are you taking a guard?" I demand.

"I have Lance. I don't need one."

"Well, I'm meeting up with some friends, so I won't be alone. And we'll be in a public place," I point out, crossing my arms.

Besides, what are the odds anyone from the Italian mafia would recognize me randomly on the street anyway? It's not like I have anything to do with the family business. I know better than to say it, but sometimes, I think Killian is too overbearing. No doubt he learned it from our father. Dad was always so concerned with shielding me from their world and ensuring my safety.

It's probably why I'm still a virgin. No guy wants to approach a girl when she has a scowling bodyguard glaring daggers at anyone who looks her way. It took me all of

freshman year at college to convince Killian I didn't need a bodyguard around campus. And I've been walking from class to class without a problem for years now.

I don't need someone to babysit me in a mall.

But my brother's look of disapproval tells me that he's not letting me off that easy.

"I'll have a driver drop me off, okay?" I compromise. "But I'm twenty-three, Killian. I don't need a chaperone anymore."

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“It’s not about that, and you know it. But fine. You have him drop you right at the door, and your friends better be waiting for you there. I want eyes on you at all times.”

Huffing, I release my arms from their crossed position. “You are so ridiculous. Fine. That’s where we were supposed to meet anyway.”

“I’m serious, Quinny. No driving yourself. If you do, I’ll know. And watch your back, okay? Call if you need anything.”

“Will do,” I say, knowing it’s easier just to agree. “Did you come to tell me something?” I ask, redirecting the conversation once again.

“Oh. Yeah. Dinner’s at six tonight. Don’t be late. Cheryl’s cooking lobster thermidor.”

He grins, his eyes dancing as I release an appreciative groan. He knows how much I love Cheryl’s lobster.

“I’ll be there,” I assure him, my mouth watering already.

“I figured you’d say that,” he teases, playfully mussing my hair.

I swat at his hand, but he’s already turning to leave.

“Brat!” I call after him.

He doesn't respond, but I can tell he's laughing from the way his shoulders silently shake.

Glancing down at my phone, I jolt as I realize I'm running late. I lost track of time between fixing Lance's stitches and Killian showing up unexpectedly at just the wrong time.

Closing my door, I race to get ready, changing from my loose-fitting casual dress to a pair of high-waist jean shorts and a yellow crop top. Then I slip on some wedge heels, apply a light coat of mascara to my lashes, and snag my leather shoulder strap purse before rushing for the door.

It's been awhile since I went shopping with Kayla and Ellie, and I hate making them wait.

Wrangling Scott to give me a ride proves to be another delay, and I'm flustered, on the brink of giving up and driving myself—even if it would bring Killian's full fury down on my head—when I finally run into him slipping out of the kitchen pantry.

From the flush in Cheryl's cheeks, I have a pretty solid inkling of what they were doing in the enclosed space. Great, even our chef and driver are hooking up, but do I get to know what sex is like? Noooo. Because I have an overprotective big brother and a crush that's never going to look at me that way.

"There you are, Scott. I need you to take me downtown. I'm running pretty late."

"Of course, miss," he says, tugging on the lapels of his blazer as Cheryl casts me a bashful smile.

And though I'm hit with a dose of unreasonable envy over her secret tryst, I return the smile to show her I'm not angry.

Scott is pulling the car up out front within minutes, and I slide into the back seat.

“Brookfield Place please,” I say, pulling my phone out of my back pocket to text the girls that I’m running late but on my way. Then I slump back against the Escalade’s plush leather because I can’t do anything to speed things up further.

Traffic isn’t on my side, and it takes us nearly forty-five minutes to get across the bridge and into the city. By then, the girls still haven’t answered me. And when the mall finally comes into view, I’m buzzing with anticipation to see them. With all the hours of study I’ve been doing lately, along with clinicals, I think it’s been almost three months since our last coffee date.

I hope they’re not pissed or think I forgot.

“Here’s fine, Scott,” I say, grabbing the door handle before he’s fully pulled to a stop.

“Give me a shout whenever you’re ready to be picked up,” he says. “I’ll stay nearby.”

“Thank you!” I call as I slip out of the SUV and close the door behind me. Then I race toward the glass doors of the shopping mall.

I scan the front of the building as I walk, searching for my girls. But they’re not waiting in our usual spot. Frowning, I slow and take a closer look, but neither Kayla’s signature purple pixie cut nor Ellie’s dark hair and wide smile stand out in the pedestrians making their way across the sidewalk.

Stepping aside to get out of the flow of foot traffic, I pull my phone out once more and find a text from Ellie.

Sorry, girl! Just saw your text. We figured you were running late, so we went inside to grab coffees. Come meet us at Matchaful.

Glancing over my shoulder, I check to see if Scott's still here. Thankfully, he's already pulled away because Killian would murder me if he found out I broke his rule right out the starting gate.

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Slipping my phone back into my purse, I turn to head inside.

And slam headlong into a wall of muscle.

“Sorry. Didn’t see you there,” I gasp, stumbling back.

The person I slammed into reaches for me, grasping my arms firmly as he keeps me on my feet. And I smile sheepishly up at him. But when I meet his cold brown eyes, my grin slowly melts away.

“No need to apologize,” he says smoothly. “You’re actually just the person I wanted to meet.”

My stomach drops as my blood turns to ice, and I silently curse myself for not listening to Killian’s words of warning. If I were paying closer attention to my surroundings, I might have noticed he was coming for me. But now that I’ve had a good look at him, he’s unmistakably Italian, with his dark hair, olive skin, and proud Roman nose.

“You don’t want to do this,” I murmur attempting to pull away from his grasp.

But his grip tightens around my arms, his fingers pressing into my skin with bruising force.

“No, *bellezza*, I really think I do,” he sneers.

And then the world around me goes dark as a hood is yanked down over my head.

LANCE

It's past dinnertime, and Quinn still isn't home.

And while Killian and Natasha seem wrapped up in their own little world, I can't shake the feeling that something's terribly wrong.

I cast a glance toward the front door for what must be the hundredth time, my half-eaten lobster growing cold on its plate. But I can't seem to find my appetite.

"Not hungry tonight, Mr. Knight?" Cheryl asks as she and Henry enter the dining room to collect our dinner plates and replace them with sorbet.

Killian glances toward my food and shakes his head. "Quinn's fine, Lance. She texted me an hour ago that she's still out shopping."

"She doesn't miss lobster," I say, forcing the words past the iron grip of tension around my throat.

"She probably decided to have dinner with her friends. She hasn't seen them in a while and might've wanted to stay and catch up," Killian counters. "Besides, she was in a mood this morning. I wouldn't put it past her to stay out later to make a point. You know how much she hates it when I try to curb her freedom."

"She should have taken a guard with her," I growl, that feeling of agitation in my gut growing stronger.

"You tell her next time. She might actually listen to you," Killian jokes, and he turns his attention back to Natasha.

I love my foster brother. I would do anything for him. But sometimes, I want to beat the humor right out of him. And right now is one of those times.

“I set some lobster aside for her,” Cheryl says kindly, patting my shoulder.

I give her a silent nod, knowing she’s trying to comfort me. But I just can’t let it go. Something’s off. I glance toward Killian’s phone placed face up on the table—because as much as he wants to take her absence lightly, I know he was starting to worry before Quinn sent that text.

But for whatever reason, it hasn’t calmed my tension at all. And I glare at the black screen, willing Quinn to call and prove my unnerving instinct wrong.

As if in answer to my command, his screen lights up.

Killian reaches for it a little too quickly to be as indifferent as he pretended, and Natasha’s careful gaze watches as he answers and holds it to his ear. “Yeah.”

Not how he would answer the phone for Quinn, and the tension in my shoulders escalates.

“What the hell?” Killian’s eyes flash to mine as he stands so abruptly from his chair that it falls backward, clattering against the floor.

Cheryl jumps beside me, her palm going to her breast in surprise.

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I'm on my feet in an instant, my fists balling as I brace for a fight.

"We'll be right there," he says and ends the call. "That was the front gate guard. Quinn was dropped off there. He said I need to come out immediately."

"It could be a trap," Natasha says, rising from the table as well, her movements demonstrating a catlike grace.

"I'm going with you," I state, practically herding Killian toward the door as I follow closely on his heels.

We walk because the Bugatti won't fit us all and Scott's out with the Escalade—probably still waiting in the city since Quinn was dropped off.

Natasha joins us, her steps light compared to Killian's pounding beats as we race toward the gate. My hand remains on my firearm tucked into the back of my pants because the younger Sokolov sister is right. It could be a trap.

But when I see Quinn's slim figure sprawled on the concrete, all sense of caution evaporates.

The gate guard stands from his crouch beside her, stepping forward to meet us. I scarcely hear what he has to say, though, as Killian and I drop to the ground as we reach her. A smattering of bruises circle her wrists and ankles. With several more dotting her legs, arms, and face. Angry welts cover her limbs. And a small trickle of blood runs down her temple from her hairline.

But what terrifies me most is how utterly still she is.

“Quinn. Quinny,” Killian says cupping her cheek.

“I think she’s unconscious,” the gate guard says, strain making his tone tight and high.

“Who did this?” Killian snarls, his gaze snapping toward the guard.

“Th-they said they were with someone named Lucian. They wanted me to give you a message.”

“What is it?” Killian demands as I feel for a pulse on her wrist.

And relief floods my body when I find it thrumming, strong and steady, through her veins.

“She’s alive,” I murmur, and I lean in to gently scoop her up off the sidewalk. She weighs next to nothing and looks terrifyingly fragile as I lift her in my arms. For the first time in forever, I feel helpless. Someone I care about more than anything in the world—someone I would give my life to protect—was hurt. Badly. Sudden and intense rage floods my chest. I want to destroy whoever is responsible.

“They said the Kings need to keep their noses out of Don Lucian’s business—the Sokolov empire will be his, and if you don’t want to lose your sister for good, you’ll stay out of it,” the guard says, his voice halting as he repeats the message reluctantly—as if he wants no part of whatever “business” Lucian and the Kings are involved in.

Killian comes to a stand beside me, Natasha following our movements as she continues to scan the dark street beyond the gates. And as I cradle Quinn close to my

chest, she reminds me of the young girl she once was.

Her face is smooth and slack in her unconsciousness, her skin so pale it makes the smattering of freckles on her nose and cheeks stand out. She better not be seriously injured, or whoever dared to hurt her will suffer a slow and painful death.

I want nothing more than to wrap my fingers around Lucian Agosti's throat right now, knowing that this was done at his command.

"Let's get her inside," Killian says, his voice low and soft and deadly as he brushes the stray locks of hair back from Quinn's face. His eyes burn with the same infernal fury blazing in my chest.

The trudge back to his brightly lit mansion is tense as he calls Scott to question him and informs him to come home.

And all the while, I can't tear my eyes from Quinn's pale complexion for longer than a moment. I hate this powerless feeling, the intense sense of failure. Because I wasn't there to protect her. I should have been.

I carry her down the hall to her wing of the house, and Killian opens the door to her room, his expression grave. Maybe it's me, but in the light, she looks even more frail. I lay her gently onto her bed, careful not to jostle her. And a spike of fear lances through me as I wonder if I shouldn't have moved her at all. If she has any severe internal injuries, I could have made them worse.

But I hated seeing her on the ground like that.

"She's covered in welts and bruises," Killian growls, turning her wrists over to reveal the red and deep-black-and-purple marks.

The bruise on her cheek looks swollen, the faint outline of fingerprints marking her beautiful skin. Someone slapped her. Hard. And my hackles rise as I think of anyone daring to lay a hand on her.

“I’ll call my family doctor,” Natasha says. “He’s made house calls at this time of night before. He’ll do it for me.”

Killian gives a curt nod, then he starts to pace at the foot of Quinn’s bed. That same seething restlessness pounds through my veins, but I can’t bring myself to leave Quinn’s side. My protective instincts are in overdrive, my senses attuned to the vulnerable young woman lying unconscious on her bed.

But I turn my head to watch my foster brother as he works himself into a rage.

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“I’ll kill him. I’ll kill them all,” he snarls.

Killian’s as close to losing it as he’s ever come because it’s his kid sister. And Quinn’s normally the one who handles nursing questions. I don’t know what to do for her, and right now, fighting won’t solve anything. She needs a doctor, and I’m grateful to Natasha for having come up with such a quick solution.

In the meantime, I turn and lean over Quinn, gently parting her silken blond hair so I can find where the blood is coming from. She has a good-sized lump on her head with a small laceration. But it’s not too deep, and based on the injuries I’ve sustained in the past and Quinn’s assessment of them, I think she might get away with not having stitches.

It feels like it takes the doctor hours to arrive, though he rings the doorbell less than forty-five minutes after Natasha makes the call, and she leads him to Quinn’s bedroom where Killian and I stand watch over her.

With the doctor here, I finally step back to give him space to work. He’s methodical and gentle, checking each of her welts, bruises, and abrasions before turning his attention to the lump on her head. He opens her eyelids and flashes a penlight to check their reaction. After cleaning each of her cuts and closing the one on her scalp with butterfly tape, he finally removes his rubber medical gloves with a snap, bringing his exam to a close.

“She’ll be okay,” he says gently. “For all her bumps and bruises, I don’t think she’ll have any lasting damage. Though, I want you to call me right away if she wakes in considerable pain. Otherwise, I think she just needs rest. She does have a minor

concussion and will need to take it easy for a few days. You can give her acetaminophen for the pain, but avoid ibuprofen or any painkillers that would increase her risk of bleeding.”

“Thank you, Dr. Miller,” Natasha says, following him toward the door.

“For you, my girl, anything.” He gives her a soft smile, then a respectful nod to me and Killian before departing.

Only then can I release the breath it feels like I’ve been holding since we got the call from the front-gate guard earlier this evening. Killian and I share a look that expresses both the same sense of relief to know Quinn will be okay and the grim determination to punish those who hurt her.

Then we settle in to wait, occupying her desk chair and the one before her vanity as we stay to watch over her. I don’t think either of us is willing to leave her side until she wakes. I want to hear what happened, who took her—if she recognized any of them—and whatever lead we might get from her first-hand account.

But more than that, I still desperately need to hear from her own lips that she’s alright.

Until then, the knot in my stomach will remain.

We sit in almost complete silence, allowing her to rest. And as the hours slowly tick by, I feel the weight of sleep nagging at the back of my mind. But I refuse to turn in until we’ve had a chance to speak with Quinn. And I definitely don’t want her to wake up all alone.

She’s been through enough trauma for one day.

It's well past midnight when a pained groan issues from the bed, and I sit up, suddenly alert as Quinn stirs. Her head turns, her face pinching in an expression of discomfort.

Then she sits up so suddenly, it makes me jolt.

She doesn't pause to take in her surroundings. I don't think she even sees me or Killian in the room before she's on her feet, bolting toward the door as if on pure instinct. And she's past her brother before he has a chance to catch her.

As I'm closer to the door, I stand quickly and wrap an arm around her waist before she can get too far. "Easy, Quinn. I've got you," I murmur, pulling her close to my chest.

And she shudders violently as the fight leaves her in an instant. Burying her face in my shoulder, Quinn sobs. Enfolding her in my arms, I hold her fiercely, and glance up to share a stunned look with Killian.

Quinn's shaking so hard, it's making my teeth rattle, and her quivering body nearly undoes me. I've never seen her fall apart like this.

"Oh my God, I was so scared," she breathes between sobs.

Fresh anger rips through me, turning my vision red. I'm more furious than I've ever been in my life.

I'll kill every last one of the Italians for laying a hand on Quinn.

8

QUINN

“Please, just let me go,” I plead, fighting back tears as I twist my wrists, trying to wiggle loose from my bindings.

“You hear that, Vinny? The Irish princess thinks it’s time to let her go home,” my kidnapper mocks, laughing with his partner as they loom over me, violent mirth in their eyes.

“My brother will find me,” I warn. “It’s better if you let me go now. If he knows you took me, he’ll kill you. And I promise, it won’t be quick and pain?—”

The hand comes out of nowhere, striking my cheek with such force that it snaps my head sideways, and I see stars. And though I’m trying to put on a brave face—I’m trying to be strong—I can’t help the fear that grips my chest like a vise.

I don’t know where I am aside from that it looks like an abandoned warehouse of some sort. And while, by now, I’ve figured out that my captors are most definitely Italians who must be working for Don Lucian, I don’t know what they intend to do with me.

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All I know is this might be my last night on earth.

And I keep running Killian's warning through my head over and over again.

Why was I so stubborn?

I should have taken a guard. But I hate the looks I get when I do. And when I don't have them, I can feel like a normal person. Not the daughter of some mafia boss—not his sister.

But Killian was right.

I can't escape who I am. Who my family is. No matter how much I'd like to pretend I'm someone else.

"What do you say, Vinny? Shall we start cutting her up? Sending little bits and pieces of her back to her brother until he gets the message?"

My stomach knots, my heart hammering in my chest as the reality of my situation comes crashing down on me. They kidnapped me to send Killian a message. And while I really don't like the thought of experiencing that kind of pain, I really don't want to be another headstone my brother has to visit.

"The boss said artificial injuries only," Vinny counters.

"Pity," my nameless captor says, then he turns his attention back to me as malice glints in his eyes. "That's alright. I think we'll have plenty of fun with you before the

night is done.”

Pain sears across my thigh, and I cry out as he brings a riding crop down on my leg.

I jerk forward, my head pounding as a sob rips up my throat, and suddenly, I’m sitting up in bed in a dark room—my room. A thin line of golden light shines beneath the bottom of my door, and I can hear my brother’s voice come to an abrupt halt on the other side.

But the fear of being alone in the dark is so consuming, I feel I might suffocate.

And with my captor’s eyes fresh in my mind, lurking in the corners of my consciousness, I’m overcome with an intense sense of hopelessness. Like I’m still trapped in that horrible warehouse, unable to escape their vicious game.

I break into tears as Killian and Lance burst back into the room, leaving the door open wide to let a stream of light wash across my bed.

“Shh, Quinny, you’re okay. You’re safe,” Killian says, making the edge of the bed sink several inches as he settles onto it and pulls me into a hug.

Behind him, Lance hovers protectively, his face a blend of concern and fury.

Choking down my sobs, I nod and try to collect myself. “I just...every time I close my eyes, I see their faces,” I hiccup, brushing at my tears and then flinching when my cheek throbs.

Killian sighs heavily, pulling back just enough to look me in my eyes. “What can I do?”

“Nothing,” I whisper, heat radiating in my cheeks. “It was just a bad dream. I thought

I was still there...with them...and the pain felt so real.”

“You’re here. You’re safe, and I’ll never let them hurt you again,” Killian assures me vehemently.

“Never again,” Lance agrees, his statement adamant and fierce enough to make my heart flutter.

“Try to get some sleep, okay? The doc said you need rest,” my brother says, chucking my chin affectionately and attempting to flash me one of his devilish smiles. But I can see the worry lurking behind his eyes.

I nod, though I’m terrified at the thought of sleeping.

Because I know as soon as I do, my captors will be there waiting for me.

Studying my face, Killian hesitates. “I could sleep on the floor,” he offers, clearly reading the fear that pounds through my veins.

I’ve never been more tempted to take him up on the offer. But he has a new wife, who I’m sure is missing him by now, and I don’t want to seem like a baby. I’m an adult. And I’ve gone to nursing school. I realize this is residual trauma. I can handle this.

“No, I’ll be fine,” I say, my voice trembling with the thought of my brother being all the way on the other side of the house. Would it be childish to ask if I can sleep in a room next to his?

“I’m staying the night,” Lance cuts in. “I’ll stay in the room across the hall—in case you need me.”

Touched by his offer because Lance doesn't normally do that kind of thing, I look up to meet his eyes gratefully. Somehow, it makes me feel so much better knowing someone I trust will be within easy hearing range. The thought of having Lance close makes me feel safe. He wouldn't let anyone get near me. Not that I think they'll try taking me again tonight.

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From what Killian told me, the Italians dropped me off while I was unconscious, so their plan must not have been to keep me. I don't recall them taking me from the warehouse, though. They must have done that after knocking me out. Because the last thing I remember is them laughing as I pleaded for them to stop. Then something heavy connecting with my head.

"Thank you," I murmur, giving Lance a watery smile.

He gives a curt nod, the tendons in his jaw working with silent agitation.

"You sure I can't do anything?" Killian asks.

I shake my head and flinch as my brain throbs inside my skull.

With a last, resigned sigh, Killian pulls me in for another gentle hug. Then he presses a kiss to my forehead before rising from the edge of the bed.

"Killian?" I ask as he reaches the door.

He turns to face me, hesitating on the threshold.

"Will you leave the light on?"

"Of course," he says, flicking it on.

Then he and Lance slip silently from the room.

Settling back into my pillows, I stare blankly up at the ceiling, searching for the courage to close my eyes. But eventually, the weight of exhaustion starts to weigh down my eyelids, and I slowly let them close as I drift off into oblivion.

My skin prickles with that sense of someone watching me as I make my way swiftly down the sidewalk, and I hug my textbook close to my chest as I pick up the pace. I shouldn't be walking alone. It was a stupid idea. I'm exposed. Vulnerable. And my next class is a five-minute walk across campus.

Glancing back over my shoulder, I spot the man I sensed watching me. And he's doing more than that. He's following, his long strides slow and steady, and yet somehow, he seems to be gaining on me.

With a gasp, I turn to run.

And slam into a solid wall of muscle.

"There you are."

Terror races up my spine. I know that voice. And when I snap my eyes up to look at the face attached to the solid chest, I find cold brown eyes and a cruel smile.

"No," I gasp. How did he find me so quickly?

"No?" my nameless captor sneers, his fingers wrapping around my arms with bruising force as he jerks me against him. "Did you think you'd get away that easy, princess? We had so much fun last time, I thought I'd come back for more."

"Let me go!" I scream, yanking back as hard as I can to try and get away.

But he just turns me, wrapping an arm around my waist and pressing my back firmly

against him as his hand covers my mouth. His lips brush the shell of my ear, and he whispers, “Maybe this time I’ll give you a thorough pounding with my cock too.”

I flail, screaming bloody murder as I fight with all my might, but the harder I struggle, the more futile it feels. And no one around me stops to help. No one even looks up.

9

LANCE

I jolt upright, adrenaline flooding my veins as Quinn screams. And I can’t take it any longer. I have to help. Throwing my covers off, I yank my jeans up over my hips and pad across the hall to intervene.

If I hoped to get a wink of sleep by staying at the Kings, I was wrong. But just the thought of leaving Quinn’s house tonight solidified my decision. I couldn’t bring myself to go when I know she’s suffering. I’ve never seen her so afraid.

In truth, I’ve never seen Quinn scared of anything.

So seeing her fall apart tonight nearly broke me.

And as I lay awake into the early hours of the morning, listening to Quinn’s fitful sleep, it drove my fury toward the Agosti men to new heights. Every whimper, every soft plea for them to stop slowly felt like they might drive me insane.

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Half a dozen times throughout the night, I got out of bed, ready to go check on her. But I wasn't sure that having another man wake her in the night would make her feel any better. So I closed my eyes and gritted my teeth as my nerves slowly frayed from the sounds of her haunting dreams.

The scream is what launched me past my breaking point, and as I enter her room, my heart twists. She's kicking at her sheets tangled around her legs. And though her eyes are open, confirming she's awake, they're wide with fear, her face pale and tense. She's shaking like a leaf, her arms struggling to hold her upright as she trembles visibly.

Her head snaps in my direction, her gaze locking with mine, and tears well in her eyes, making them shimmer.

Hesitating at the doorway, I debate whether I should go in to comfort her or if she needs her space. "Are you okay?" I rasp, my tension making my voice sound strained.

Quinn nods, but she looks so shaken it makes my chest ache.

"It was just a nightmare," she says, her voice quavering.

I pause, wanting to stay with her but sensing that her quick assurance might mean she would rather I go. And after a painful moment of debate, I give a curt nod, then force myself to turn and go.

"Wait," Quinn says, stopping me in my tracks.

I look back over my shoulder and meet her tear-filled eyes once more.

“Would you sit with me for a little while, just until I calm down?” she asks, wiping at her cheeks.

And when she flinches, my stomach knots because I know the bruise on her cheek must hurt.

I leave the door open as I enter wordlessly and pull up a chair beside her bed. The tension in my shoulders eases slightly to be near her, and I lean forward, bracing my elbows on my knees as I watch her. “Do you want to talk about it?” I ask.

I could never bring myself to talk about my past, but I’ve heard it can help when someone’s faced a trauma like Quinn’s. And I feel so useless already, if what she needs is a listening ear, I’ll stay as long as she wants.

Quinn releases a heavy breath, her shoulders relaxing, and a shaky smile twitches at the corners of her lips. “If you don’t mind.”

I scoot closer, showing she has my full attention, and relief floods through me when she gives a startled laugh. It’s soft and entirely too brief, but it gives me a glimmer of hope that she might be okay.

Then her smile falls, and her gaze drops to her hands as she folds them in her lap. “I dreamed that they found me again, and... h-he said he wasn’t done with me. That he would...”

She swallows hard, unable to finish her sentence, and she shakes her head. Then she releases another tense breath. When she starts again, she jumps the tracks, going into the heart of her trauma to talk about what actually happened.

“They took me to an abandoned warehouse—the men who kidnapped me. I was supposed to be meeting up with Kayla and Ellie, but those men snatched me right outside the mall. I knew I screwed up as soon as he grabbed me.”

“Who?” I say gently, though a sense of urgency fills me. If I can get a name, I’ll track the bastard down.

But Quinn shakes her head again. “I never caught his name. The one who helped him was called Vinny.”

“That’s a good start,” I assure her, locking the name into my memory bank. It’s not a lot to go on, but hopefully, I can gather more details as she talks. And tomorrow, I’ll start hunting them down.

Quinn nods, her brow furrowing, but rather than voicing whatever thought made her frown, she resumes her story. “They put something over my head and dragged me into a car. I tried to keep track of the turns, to have a general sense of where we were going, but I couldn’t keep up. And I just kept thinking that this was it. They were going to kill me, and I was so stupid not to take Killian seriously...”

She falls silent for long enough, I wonder if she’s going to continue, and all the while, I hate the way she’s trying to take responsibility for what happened.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I say gruffly, my fury toward her kidnappers rising until I feel I might just explode.

Again she nods. But her words don’t reflect complete agreement. “I just feel so stupid. And I was so scared. I think Vinny drove—he was in the front seat at least. But the other one sat in the back with me. And he kept taunting me, telling me all the horrible things they were going to do to me. H-he threatened to chop pieces off of me and send them back to Killian to send a message...said he would r-rape me and drop

me off on Killian's doorstep..."

My stomach plummets, my blood turning cold as the threat hits too close to home. They all but dumped her on the front porch. No doubt they would have if the gate guard had let them in. "Did he...?" I can't bring myself to say the word. The knot in my throat is too thick to force it past. And icy devastation freezes in my chest because the doctor didn't check to see if she'd been violated when he examined her.

"Rape me?"

I nod, unsure if I'll be able to hold onto my sanity if the answer is yes.

"No, it was just a threat."

The enormity of my relief is dizzying, and I shift in my chair, struggling to stay still.

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“I think he got off on frightening me though. And I’m not sure how far he would have taken it if Vinny hadn’t told him they were just supposed to keep my injuries artificial.” Quinn shudders, goose bumps rising on her skin, and she closes her eyes as a memory takes over. Then they snap open once more to find me.

“He used one of those hard, riding crops on me, and he laughed every time I screamed.”

Tears start to stream down her face once more, and I would give anything to banish them. It’s pure agony to watch Quinn cry, but I know better than to interrupt because she’s processing. And I desperately hope that telling her story will help her work through the trauma.

“He mocked me, tormented me—Vinny did too. But the guy who beat me seemed to like it when I begged him to stop.” Quinn hiccups again, and her eyes drop to the bed as she struggles through a fresh wave of emotion.

Blood boiling to hear what she endured, I can’t stand it any longer. Reaching out carefully so as not to frighten her, I take Quinn’s delicate, talented hand in both of mine, willing her story to be over because I don’t think I can take another second of her pain.

She gasps, her lips parting, and her eyes lock on our hands momentarily. Then they travel to my face. And a soft smile warms her eyes, bringing a hint of color back to her pale cheeks.

“I’m okay,” she says more confidently. “Or I will be. I think talking about it helped.”

God, I hope so because her nightmares were agonizing to listen to.

“Thank you, Lance,” she murmurs. “For listening.”

“Anytime.” I give her hand a gentle squeeze, intensely aware of the purple ring of bruises around her wrists.

“Would you...stay until I fall asleep?” she asks tentatively, her cheeks flushing a healthier shade of pink.

I know how hard it must be for her to ask. Quinn’s about as independent as they come, but to help her sleep, I would do just about anything.

“Of course.”

Relief washes across her features, and her fingers wrap more snugly around mine as she settles back into her pillows, getting comfortable once more. I keep her hand in mine as her eyes drift slowly closed.

And even after her breathing grows slow and steady, I can’t bring myself to leave her side—not when she finally seems to have found a moment’s peace.

I don’t know how long I sit up watching her.

But the next thing I know, someone’s tapping my shoulder. And I lift my forehead from its resting place on the edge of her bed as I wake with a start. I’m still holding her hand, and it takes me a moment to realize the light filtering into the room means it’s morning.

I slept through the night at Quinn’s bedside.

Turning my stiff neck, I find Killian standing beside me. He gestures silently for me to join him in the hall. I carefully ease my hand out of Quinn's before I follow, wondering if Killian's going to be pissed for finding me in her room again. It's strange to think that was only yesterday.

It feels like so much has happened since then.

Still, I feel the need to explain myself. "She was having nightmares," I say as soon as the door closes behind me.

But Killian just waves my words away. "I need you to do something for me. I know it won't be your favorite assignment, but I can't trust anyone else to do it."

10

QUINN

The headaches and dizziness are gone within twenty-four hours. Still, I take several days off of school, lying in bed to recover physically from my injuries. And while the welts slowly fade into faint red marks, the bruises gradually shifting from purple and black into a sickly mottled green color, my nightmares only seem to get worse.

Night after night, I jolt awake, my aggressors' visages imprinted in my mind's eye. But after that first night, Lance hasn't come to check on me, even when the dreams get bad enough that I wake in a cold sweat.

More than once, I've been tempted to ask him to stay until I drift off because I slept so soundly the night that he did. But I won't. I don't want to appear weak and frightened—especially to Lance—and he has better things to do with his time than tuck me in at night like a child. Which he probably already sees me as most of the time.

He has continued to spend the night in the room across the hall, however. I know because I can hear his hushed conversations with Killian through the door late at night, and when Cheryl brings me my meals, Lance often stops in to check on me and chat—well, let me chat.

By the weekend, I know I can't keep hiding in my room, no matter how tempting it might be. I would love nothing more than to keep my head tucked into my shell. Why would I risk sticking my neck out again? Nothing is worth enduring the experience I did. And at the same time, I can't just give up on life, throw it all away over one traumatic event.

So rather than take my breakfast in my room, I march down to the dining room to join my brother, Natasha, and Lance.

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“Morning,” Killian says, his green eyes lighting up as soon as I enter.

My heart twists at the way his concern lines seem to soften on his face. I don’t like how worried I must have made him. “Morning,” I say with a sheepish grin. I nod to Natasha, then cast a shy glance in Lance’s direction.

Heat pools in my cheeks when I find him looking at me, his blue eyes pensive. But he doesn’t say a word. Just gives a subtle tip of the head before going back to his eggs.

Silence stretches in the room as I settle into my chair. Cheryl bustles in a moment later, beaming as she delivers my favorite—pancakes smothered in fresh berries. “Miss Quinn,” she says affectionately, beaming as she sets the plate before me.

“Thanks, Cheryl,” I murmur, the heat growing more intense with the realization that everyone around me seems to have been waiting with bated breath for me to get out of bed.

Everyone except Lance, of course, who seems steadily determined to clean his plate.

“I think I’ll start classes again on Monday,” I state when the silence becomes too painful.

He looks up from his food to study my face. “Are you sure? There’s nothing wrong with taking your time,” he insists.

“I’m sure,” I say.

He nods. “I figured you wouldn’t give me much of a break from worrying, so I’ve assigned Lance as your guard.”

My stomach does a nervous flip-flop, and I glance in Lance’s direction once more. “I?—”

“Before you can argue,” Killian cuts in, raising his hand, “this is non-negotiable. I don’t trust Lucian as far as I could throw him, and I’m not taking any more risks. So you either deal with having a bodyguard until this conflict is over, or you wait to go back to class. I’m fine with either of those options.”

My lips press closed, and I can’t help but smile at my brother’s protective stubbornness. I know I’ve argued with him endlessly over the years about having to drag guards around with me wherever I go. But this time, I don’t mind. After the dreams I keep having, in which Lucian’s men find me walking between classes, I’ve been debating whether I could find the courage to go back to school at all. In the end, I couldn’t let those men have the satisfaction of destroying my future.

And having Lance with me will be a massive comfort. I know he won’t let anything happen to me. Still, I feel my temperature rising just thinking about being in his proximity for an extended period like that. Again, I glance up at him from beneath my lashes and feel the blush turning me a deep shade of red when I find him watching me again.

“I wasn’t going to argue, actually,” I say, turning my gaze back to Killian before I keel over with embarrassment. “I was going to thank you. I know sparing Lance will be inconvenient.”

“Considering the number of times you’ve patched us all up, I assure you, it’s the least we could do to pay you back. And, Quinn, you’re my kid sister. All I want is for you to be safe and happy.”

My heart feels like it just might explode in my chest, and my eyes sting with unexpected tears. I love my brother so much, and I know he loves me too. But he doesn't often say sweet things like that. And with how raw and emotional I've felt since my kidnapping, hearing it is almost enough to make me cry.

"I was thinking I could show you some self-defense moves as well, if you're going to be out and about. They'll help if you get caught in a tight spot again." Natasha looks about as threatening as I feel sitting next to Killian, her petite frame slim and feminine. But her silver eyes shine with sincerity.

"You know some self-defense?" I ask, surprised.

Killian gives a slight snort, and Natasha sends him a narrow-eyed glare before turning back to me. "Yes, I'm happy to give you some pointers if you'd like."

Something in my chest loosens at the idea of being able to defend myself. If, for instance, I could have known some way to get away from my captor before he took me. And gratitude eases the tension in my shoulders as my lips stretch into a sincere smile. "That would be wonderful, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. You feel good enough to get some practice in today?"

"Definitely," I agree, nodding enthusiastically.

Within the next hour, I'm dressed in a sports bra, leggings, and running shoes, facing off with the petite Russian beauty in my brother's home gym. Her thick burgundy hair is pulled back into a basic French braid. And dressed in formfitting workout apparel, Natasha looks far less fragile than she does in her typical feminine fashion.

In fact, she looks impressively fit and toned as she stands with her feet shoulder-width apart, her knees and hips slightly bent as if she's ready to spring into action at

any moment. And while her arms rest casually by her sides, I get the feeling no one could catch her unawares.

“I’ll teach you a few different ways to fend off an attacker based on how they come at you,” she starts, getting right down to business. “It’s safe to assume that you’ll likely be dealing with someone larger than you, so rather than thinking about overpowering or outrunning an opponent, think about how to incapacitate them, right?”

“Okay?” I say tentatively. I don’t see how I’m going to incapacitate anybody—especially if they’re bigger than me. But she’s right. Killian doesn’t have many female enemies, as far as I’m aware, and I’m considerably smaller than most men.

“That means your greatest asset will be staying on your guard and being ready for them at all times. If they can’t catch you by surprise, you’re already one step ahead.”

“I think that was my biggest mistake when I was taken. I was so distracted about being late, I literally walked right into the guy.”

Natasha nods, her silver eyes flashing. “That’s a good way to throw you off-balance. Create a collision that will make you feel responsible. Let’s talk about how to handle it if someone comes at you from the front.”

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Natasha walks me through several easy steps that use leverage to break a grip on my arms. She demonstrates on me, then has me mirror the movement on her until it feels natural.

“Good,” she says when I manage to break her grip after she reaches for me at full speed.

I can tell she’s taking it easy on me, only grabbing my arms lightly each time. “Won’t it be harder if they’re stronger though?” I ask nervously, thinking about the size of the man who grabbed me. His bruising grip on my arms.

Natasha shrugs. “It might not feel as good when you break the hold. You’ll probably get a few bruises out of it. But it will be just as effective. If you’d feel better about it, I’m sure Killian or Lance would practice with you until you’re confident.”

“No, I trust you,” I say. Because, while I’m sure she’s right, I don’t know that I can handle wrestling with Lance. And Killian has enough on his mind right now. “Teach me more?” I ask, already feeling more comfortable about the idea of going out.

Natasha works with me for well over an hour, showing me various holds and how to break out of them, which areas to target in order to incapacitate an aggressor, and what moves will buy me the most time to escape. She has me practice on her time and again, and I’m stunned by how easily she blocks my attacks, allowing me to try the motion without actually hurting her.

By the end of our workout, I’m out of breath and covered in a thin layer of sweat. Meanwhile, she looks like she’s only getting started.

“How do you know so much about self-defense?” I ask as I mop my face and snatch up my water bottle.

“My father insisted that Tatiana and I at least learn the basics. He believed we should be just as strong as the men around us. It would help us survive the world we were born into. He also raised me to be an asset to the family, not a weakness. He believed power and independence were the most precious gifts he could pass to us.”

A flash of sadness crosses Natasha’s delicate features, and for a moment, I can see the intense pain that losing her father caused. Then her chin juts stubbornly forward, and her gray eyes flash with defiance. I can almost hear her thoughts. She won’t let it break her. Because her father raised her to be strong. And she’s not about to disappoint him now.

My heart twinges, and in this moment, I can understand why my brother would go to such lengths for Natasha. I can see why Killian fell so hard for the bold, intelligent woman. She’s brave and resilient and determined to hold her own in this world. I find her inspiring. And also incredibly relatable, because she’s not just some delicate flower sitting by and letting life happen around her. She’s doing what she can with the tools she was given—just like I want to.

“I think my father and Killian want the same for me, but in a different way—that’s why Killian’s putting me through nursing school, so I can get out of this life completely.”

Natasha nods, her full lips pulling into a beautiful smile. “Your brother really loves you. And he wants great things for you and your future. I feel guilty admitting how much I like having you here. Because while Killian might want you to spread your wings and find a better path, I don’t think I trust anyone to look after him like you have.”

I laugh. “When it comes down to it, I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to just walk away. I love the idea of working in a hospital, but I don’t think I’d trust anyone else with my brother either. He’s too reckless.”

Natasha laughs as well, the sound soft and warm, and I get the feeling that my sister-in-law and I might actually become good friends. I already liked her a lot. But this experience has brought us a lot closer. And I feel like I understand her so much better than I did before.

“You can say that again. I’ve never met someone so willing to spit in death’s face.”

I could almost say the same. Although, in that regard, I think Lance just might have my brother beat. It terrifies me how willing he is to lay down his life—especially to protect Killian. And when the two are together, it’s a wonder that they both keep coming home alive.

11

LANCE

I keep my head on a swivel as I stride along the campus sidewalk, keeping within easy reach of Quinn at all times. From the nervous glances her classmates cast in my direction as they pass, I imagine no one has doubts I’m armed—even if no one can see the guns concealed beneath my suit jacket. I’m sure they’re not allowed.

But no one’s tried to stop me from carrying them. Perhaps Killian called to inform the school about sending Quinn to school with a bodyguard. Or maybe no one wants to risk starting a confrontation with me. Either way, I’m glad. Because while no one tried coming for her during the first four days she returned to school, I’m not about to let down my guard. And I’ll be glad when her last Friday class is done so we can head back to the King house.

Quinn walks briskly beside me, hugging her heavy textbook to her chest like it's a shield. And though she smiles every time she greets another student on their way past, I get the feeling she has to put effort into acting cheerful. Her eyes flick up in my direction as the sidewalk clears, leaving us relatively alone for a moment. And after the quick, sidelong glance, she looks straight ahead.

"You know, you could try looking a little less like a storm cloud on occasion. I think you just made poor Chad pee his pants," she quips, her lips twitching into a grin.

I know she's trying to tease me. I can tell because Quinn and Killian both have that dancing green flame in their eyes when they make a joke.

But I'm not in the mood today. And my scowl intensifies as I look down to meet her gaze. "Why should I care if Chad has proper control of his bladder?"

Quinn laughs, the sound light and contagious, and she shakes her head. "My point is you don't have to take things quite so seriously. You're glaring at my classmates like you think one of them might kidnap me."

"I don't know which ones are your classmates," I point out bluntly.

Quinn rolls her eyes. "They're the ones who turn and run the other direction every time you glower at them. Maybe try a smile every now and again?"

I frown at her.

"Come on, Lance. Do you really think Lucian's guys are going to come for me in the middle of the day on this busy campus? In the meantime, my classmates are starting to avoid me because they think you want to murder them."

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“Don’t be ridiculous,” I state, glaring coldly at the skateboarder who comes far too close to Quinn for comfort.

He swerves closer to the grass to give her some space when I take a step in his direction.

“Seriously, Lance. Matty called me the other day to ask if it’s okay to talk to me in your presence.”

I snort.

Perhaps I have been more on edge than usual. But I can’t seem to help the frustration building in my chest day by day. I’m furious at the Italians’ audacity to take Quinn—and that I didn’t foresee the danger and insist on increasing her protection before anything happened.

I know Killian feels the same way, which is why he pulled me out of Quinn’s room that first morning after her return to put me in charge of her protection. We both agree that making me her personal bodyguard is the best way to ensure her safety. So, what do I care if her classmates are a bunch of pansies? Quinn is what matters, not their delicate egos or lack of spine.

“Do I scare you?” I ask.

That makes her laugh again. “Of course not. But I do like having friends...”

Silence stretches between us. As far as I’m concerned, if Quinn’s not scared of me,

then the rest doesn't matter. She doesn't have to like how I protect her. I will follow Quinn to school, social events, in short, everywhere her brother can't constantly have an eye on her, until Lucian and his men have been taught a lesson.

It frustrates me that my new guard duty means I can't be out hunting down and punishing the men who hurt Quinn. That's really the only thing that might release my growing tension. And I don't know that anyone will deliver the message quite so convincingly as I would.

At the same time, I doubt I could trust anyone else to keep an eye on Quinn right now. My protective instincts have been in overdrive since I saw her unconscious on the sidewalk that night. And lying awake, listening to her nightmares night after night is doing nothing to help me put it behind me. I know Quinn's trying to maintain a brave face, but she's not okay. And because of that, I'm near volcanic about the need to make someone pay.

Which is why I could give a rat's fart whether I'm scaring her classmates.

Because I fully intend to pulverize anyone who looks at Quinn the wrong way.

"Come on, Lance. Lighten up," she insists, dancing in front of me and turning to walk backward in time to my steps. "You'll give yourself an aneurysm holding on to that much fury."

"I'm fine," I growl, looking past her at the group of three guys who take note of her ass before they look up and find me watching them.

Immediately, they make themselves scarce, dispersing into the building they stood in front of moments before. And while it gives me a sense of satisfaction to know they might think twice about ogling Quinn again, it irritates me that the only good I've done this week is dissuade a few frat-boy perverts from looking at her. Because as lewd

as their appraisal was, they're harmless. I can tell by the way they practically melt into the wall when I catch them.

They're not the threat I need to be protecting her from. Meanwhile, the men who beat her hard enough with a riding crop to leave welts on her body are still out there. And though I know Killian's on the job—that he has men hunting them down, I feel like a caged tiger, eager to track them down myself.

“All I'm saying is you should stop taking everything so seriously,” Quinn teases, still walking backward, completely oblivious to the pricks who just objectified her. “What's the point of life if you can't have a little fun, right? Oop!”

In her effort to give me a hard time, she must not have noticed the raised planter to her left, and her heel catches on the corner, destabilizing her as she starts to topple backward.

Without thinking, I reach forward to catch her, my hand closing around her wrist as she flings it out for balance. And with a jerk, I pull her upright and against my chest as I grip her other elbow to stabilize her.

Quinn's eyes go wide, her cheeks coloring. But what drives a knife into my gut is the way she flinches. Probably because I accidentally grabbed her where she's still wearing a bracelet of bruises. I drop her wrist like it's on fire, clenching my teeth as I fight my impatience.

“This is serious, Quinn,” I growl. “They could have killed you. I should be out there destroying the bastards who thought they could touch a member of the King family and get away with it. Not strolling around campus, babysitting you.”

Hurt flashes across her face, her green eyes holding a puppy dog's disappointment that says I insulted her personally—though that was not my intent—and I

immediately feel bad for letting my frustration get the better of me.

But before I can apologize, she recovers quickly. “I know. I’m sorry. I can’t imagine following me around is the most exciting job you could have. But I bet Killian would be willing to give you a few days off from nannying his annoying little sister.” She offers me a tight-lipped grimace. “And I can stay home this weekend so you don’t have to constantly keep an eye on me.”

“Quinn...” I start, searching for how to make things right—because I know I hurt her, even if she doesn’t want to say it. But as usual, the words stick in my throat, making it impossible to talk.

“Come on. One more class, then you’re free to let loose and slaughter Italians to your heart’s content until Monday.” Her smile is watery as she turns away from me, and she skips lightly up the steps to the science building.

Silently kicking myself for letting my frustration get the better of me, I follow. And I return my attention to glowering at the people in our vicinity.

12

QUINN

“We’re home!” I call, entering through the towering front door of my brother’s Seagate mansion.

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Lance follows silently, locking the door firmly behind us.

“Good thing. I’m starving,” Killian says, slinging an arm around my shoulders before I’ve even had time to put down my schoolbag. “I was about to tell Cheryl to serve up dinner without you.”

Jabbing him playfully in the stomach, I slip out from under his arm and deposit my books by the stairs leading up to my wing of the house. “Like she would ever betray me like that,” I chide.

“Hey, Quinn,” Natasha says, entering gracefully from the patio. “How’d the first week back at school end up?”

I glance up at Lance, who’s not far from my right shoulder, and heat creeps up my neck. Because after our conversation earlier, I’m more conflicted about how I might answer that than ever. He made it perfectly clear that he would rather be out murdering the Italians than babysitting me. And all the while, his constant proximity has been wreaking havoc on my nerves all week. Because despite my best efforts, it’s making my crush on him grow to almost unbearable intensity.

It hurt—hearing that spending so much time with me is an annoyance to him, and it reinforces that he probably only sees me as an annoying little sister. So, while I’ve actually kind of enjoyed my week back at school, I don’t feel good admitting it.

“It was fine.” I shrug. “Nothing out of the norm.”

“That’s good.” Natasha offers me an encouraging smile.

I return it, unusually glad that I have another girl in the house—someone who's not my brother or the man I'm painfully attracted to.

Filing into the dining room, we all take our places at the table. And as Cheryl brings in the first course of spring salad with strawberries and caramelized walnuts drizzled in cherry molasses dressing, I glance toward my brother.

"How was your week?" I ask, picking at my salad and pushing it around my plate as I make a weak attempt at foraging for information about the Italian conflict.

"Not nearly as bad as some people's," he says cheekily, sharing a pointed look with Lance.

Oh God. Has Lance been so frustrated about babysitting me that he even talked to Killian about it? My cheeks flame just thinking about it, and I have the distinct urge to shrink in my chair and hide beneath the table.

"You're making Lucian pay, then?" Lance asks, his voice gruff with intensity.

Killian's responding smirk sends a shiver down my spine, and though I know that probably means someone's dead right about now, it also gives me an intense amount of relief to know Killian wasn't referring to Lance.

"Tenfold," he says. "I'm sorry you couldn't join in the fun, but I'll give you the gory details sometime."

Rolling my eyes, I spear my salad leaves more forcefully than necessary. "I hate it when you talk about it all vaguely like that. As if I'm not as much a part of this as you are. If you want to tell him, why not just tell him? I think Lance has endured enough being stuck with babysitting duty this week. Please, put him out of his misery."

“I hardly think it’s appropriate dinner talk,” Killian says. “You might enjoy all the blood and guts from nursing, but I don’t want Lance or Natasha to lose their appetites. Cheryl said she made pot roast.”

“That’s right,” Cheryl announces, stepping through the doorway from the kitchen with Henry on her heels. “So you better be hungry.”

Releasing a heavy breath, I do my best to set aside my defensive feelings. I hate being left in the dark. Feeling like an inconvenience to Lance and my brother. Being part of the family but not quite one of the Kings. And my conversation with Lance earlier only makes me feel more like I’m just in the way. Still, I know my brother has a point. If they are actually gory details, maybe I’m not the reason he doesn’t want to discuss them.

“I thought a movie night might be nice,” Natasha says as we dig into our second course. “It’s been forever since I’ve sat down and watched one with anybody. And I thought it could be a nice, normal-person tradition to start up. Care to join us?”

She flashes me a warm smile, and I can’t say no to my sister-in-law when she puts it that way.

“Sure,” I agree. “Sounds fun. What are we watching?”

“Anything but *The Godfather*. Or *Scarface*,” Killian interjects quickly.

Natasha laughs. “Don’t want to watch a documentary of your life?” she teases.

“Hardly,” he snorts.

“Well then, how about *The Departed*?” I suggest innocently.

My brother glares in my direction.

“I was thinking something a bit more...lighthearted,” Natasha says, pressing her lips together in amusement as she glances my way. “Maybe a comedy or chick flick.”

I shrug. “Sounds fun.” Honestly, watching my brother sit down for a chick flick might be more amusing than the movie itself. But he doesn’t utter a single objection—which is how I know that Natasha has him all but wrapped around her finger.

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And I don't even bother to glance in Lance's direction. Because after our conversation this afternoon, I'm sure he'll be out the door as soon as dinner's over. Not that I can blame him. He's been spending the night here since I was taken. He'd probably like to spend some time at his house. Without having to think about me and my problems.

But as we finish up in the dining room and head toward my brother's mostly unused home theater, I'm surprised to find him just a few steps behind me. And as Killian and Natasha take one couch, my sister-in-law curling up against my brother's side, that leaves me and Lance to share the other couch.

Natasha scrolls through her phone, finding a movie and casting it to the TV, while Lance closes the door and turns the lights down.

And as soon as he settles onto the cushion beside me, the room charges with unexpected electrical energy. He's careful to occupy the far end, resting one arm across the back of the cushions while his other leans against the armrest. But he's so tall, his fingertips come within inches of my shoulder.

I can barely breathe, he's so close. I tuck my feet up underneath me, wrapping my arms around my legs so I don't do anything that might actually make me brush against him. But as the screen flickers to life and the opening song blares through the surround sound speakers, I can almost feel the body heat radiating from Lance.

His clean, crisp scent still smells vaguely of gunpowder and smoke, and I wonder how that could be when he's spent all week following me around, doing completely innocuous things. Does he wear some kind of cologne labeled Badass Masculinity or

something?

I've never been more grateful for the dark because it hides the flush I feel creeping into my cheeks. Because, while this isn't the first movie I've ever sat down to watch with Lance, I've normally had a roomful of family watching with us, making noise and being rowdy. And usually, Lance and Killian are fighting over who gets what space on a couch. I've never watched a movie with Lance when it's only us and another couple in the room.

And though I know it's as far from a double date as this could possibly get, it still feels dangerously close to becoming one.

I can barely focus on the storyline with Lance in such close proximity. Honestly, I don't even know if Natasha picked a rom-com or a serious movie. Because I'm trying my best not to continuously watch Lance out of the corner of my eye like some lovesick puppy.

Still, I can't help but steal glances of him from under my lashes now and again. And every time, he looks perfectly at ease, his shoulders relaxed, his deep-ocean eyes focused on the screen. His powerful jawline and the dark facial hair that looks like a five-o'clock shadow three days in the making only emphasize how masculine he is.

He could seriously be the love interest in a Hollywood movie. Girls would swoon over watching him in a meet-cute with some perky-breasted, lip-filler blonde. But the thought of Lance taking up acting nearly makes me laugh out loud. I can't imagine for an instant the stoic man of so few words choosing to be a movie star.

Pressing my lips together to suppress the humor that bubbles up inside me, I keep my eyes locked on the screen for the rest of the movie. And by the time the ending credits roll, my body is stiff from how still I sat through the entire thing.

With a soft groan, I stretch my legs to put my feet back onto the floor, and I glance to my left, where Killian and Natasha are sitting. Despite this being her idea, Natasha must have fallen asleep sometime during the movie. Her cheek rests on the shoulder of the arm my brother has wrapped around her. And the look he gives her as he glances down to see her sleeping is so incredibly tender it makes my heart ache.

With a soft smile, he shifts carefully to sneak his other arm beneath her knees, and then he hoists her up off the couch without so much as jostling her.

Our eyes meet, and I can't help but smile at just how damn cute my brother and his wife are. Talk about a match made in heaven. A pang of longing slices through my chest, and try as I might not to, I wish that Lance and I could be like that.

Unrequited feelings are the worst.

Not only are they frustrating and humiliating. They make me feel completely pathetic.

And still, I can't seem to help myself.

Because try as I might, I've never felt for any guy the way I do about Lance.

Not even fractionally.

"Night," Killian murmurs, and as Lance opens the door for him, my brother slips out into the hall to carry his bride to their room.

Sighing, I lean over to collect the remote and turn off the TV. Then I straighten and head toward the hallway and bed. To my surprise, Lance is waiting there for me. And without a word, he falls into step with me as I head down the hall.

The silence between us feels oddly tense. Awkward even. Not something I'm used to because Lance has always been quiet. It's probably just me, and the fact that my feelings for him have gone completely haywire over the past week. I silently berate myself for allowing all the childish fantasies I've had about him over the years.

It's so much easier to indulge in a crush when that person isn't around twenty-four seven, reminding you that you're the only one who wants more than friendship.

"Did you like the movie?" I ask when I can't stand the tension any longer. Is it just me, or is my voice a higher pitch than usual? I swallow hard, trying to force the tightness in my chest to release.

Lance shrugs and glances down at me. "Did you?"

Seeing as I don't even know what it was about, I have absolutely no clue. And now I wish I hadn't said anything. "Yeah. Sure. It was...great."

We fall into silence once again, and as my bedroom door comes into view, I experience the worst blend of relief and disappointment. I pause outside of it, my hand on the knob as I turn to Lance. He pauses, turning toward me, and for the briefest moment, I wonder if he might be thinking about kissing me.

What is wrong with you, Quinn? Of course he's not.

"Good night," Lance says, his deep baritone vibrating through my body and lighting my nerve endings up like a Christmas tree.

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And suddenly, my crush on Lance is so completely overwhelming, it takes all my self-restraint not to step into his arms and make the first move myself.

“Good night,” I squeak, and with stiff limbs, I force myself to turn and enter my bedroom.

Closing the door behind me, I lean my back against the solid wood and listen until I hear his door across the hall close as well. Then, swallowing hard, I head to my bathroom to get ready for bed.

But as I settle into my pillows a short time later, pulling the covers up to my chin, I can't help but wonder what it would be like to watch a movie curled against Lance's shoulder, to have him carry me like a bride up the stairs. To have him take me to his room and share a bed with me.

The overwhelming sense of longing, the massive hole that punches through my chest at the vivid fairy tale is just too much. I never should have let Lance be my bodyguard. Having him present constantly is probably the worst thing for me because I have absolutely no control over my feelings for him. And I'm at a loss for what to do about it.

I can't just will them away.

And I sure as hell can't tell anyone about them.

Groaning in frustration, I roll onto my side, curling into a ball. And as I close my eyes, I know it's going to be another night of tossing and turning.

Because as soon as my thoughts of Lance finally subside and I drift into oblivion, those cruel brown eyes are waiting for me with a wicked smile.

13

LANCE

Glancing at the bedside alarm clock, I make note of the time: 1:56 a.m. And Quinn's still restless. They come in fits, her nightmares. And it doesn't matter how much time passes, they seem to grow worse each night.

Grinding my teeth, I try to reason with myself that she'll get through it. She's a strong girl. A woman, really. She just needs time. But I hate the sound of her whimpering pleas. Every night, they rip me to shreds. And at the same time, her cries make my blood boil.

It breaks my heart to think about what happened to her. In truth, I've hardly slept since that night because the thought of it plagues me. Those men putting their hands on her. Hurting her. All to send a message. If they thought it would make us back down, they made a grave mistake.

From Killian's reports, at least the Italians aren't getting away with what they did. The Kings have been brutal in our retaliation—none of which I've gotten to take part in. And it sets my teeth on edge to know that I didn't get to watch the life drain from those men's eyes. I'm not sure if it would have been enough to satisfy me. But at least then I would know, deep in my soul, that the men who hurt Quinn could never do it again.

Killian saw to that, and I trust my foster brother inherently. He wasn't about to let those bastards breathe a moment longer than it took to find them. Still, I would have loved to break every bone in their bodies.

Releasing an aggravated sigh. I close my eyes and try to relax, letting Quinn's soft, troubled murmurs become background noise. With monumental effort, I get my muscles to unwind, my mind to stop perseverating on the traumatized young woman across the hall, and the bloodlust burning in my veins to cool.

I focus on my breaths—in, out, in, out, in...until the dark sense of foreboding that shrouds me seeps away.

“No, please!” Quinn screams, bringing my body upright and adrenaline pounding through my veins. “Let me go! Let me—get off me!” she shrieks, her voice so desperate and full of genuine terror that I'm struck with the horrible fear that someone might actually be in her room.

They could have broken in through her window, though anyone getting past the house's defenses would be a masterful feat, if not impossible.

But as Quinn's pleas continue to grow more frantic, I have to see for myself.

Springing out of bed, I snatch up a pair of joggers and haul them on as I run.

Heart hammering against my ribs, I fling myself across the hall, wrenching her door open with such force, I nearly take it off its hinges.

Quinn's cries come to an abrupt halt as I flick the light on, filling the room with a golden glow. And I find her sitting up, her back pressed firmly against her headboard, curled into a tight ball with her knees to her chest.

She's as white as a sheet, her green eyes as round as dinner plates, and she's trembling like a leaf as her head swivels frantically to find something—or someone.

“Quinn?” I rasp, my throat tight with anxiety.

Quickly I scan the room for any indication of an intruder. And when I look back at her, our gazes meet.

Then, all at once, she bursts into tears. Burying her face against her knees, she sobs. And my wall of stoic defense crumbles completely. She looks so damn...broken. It just might kill me. Without thinking it through, my feet are carrying me across the room.

I settle onto the corner of her bed, scooping her into my arms. And I gather as much of her up as I can in my desperation to keep her in one piece.

“Are you okay?” I murmur, my heart thundering against my ribs as I continue to search the room. But everything looks perfectly in place. The window is locked. The bathroom empty as far as I can see.

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“It was just another bad dream,” she says between hiccuping sobs. “It just felt so real,” she breathes. Then she buries her face against my chest as she trembles violently.

“Shh, I’ve got you,” I breathe, rocking slightly in the hopes that it will soothe her.

Slowly, her tears start to subside, her breathing grows steadier. And as her quivering calms, she sags against me, as if all the terror has completely sapped her strength.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, her breath washing across my chest, and it’s the first time I notice I didn’t put a shirt on in my haste to get to her.

“For what?”

“I must have scared the hell out of you screaming like that.”

She releases a shaky laugh, and it makes my chest tighten, my heart twisting painfully.

“I’m just glad you’re safe,” I rasp, my throat tight with an inexplicable ache that makes me feel like I could cry.

And I realize belatedly that it’s because I’ve never meant words more sincerely. I don’t know what I would do if Quinn weren’t alright. I think I might just lose my mind. And it’s earth-shattering to realize just how deeply it would affect me if anything were to happen to her.

“Lance?” she says tentatively, keeping her cheek pressed to my chest, her lips brushing softly across my pec.

“Mmm?”

“Would you stay with me? Just for a little while?”

The lump in my throat is near impossible to swallow, but I force it down as I pull her more snugly into my arms. “Of course,” I rasp. And I scoot her gently over so I can settle back against her headboard.

Releasing the breath trapped in my lungs, I rest my head back against the solid bed frame and look up at her ceiling. I take a moment to appreciate her steady warmth radiating into me, the soft way her body molds to mine. She fits perfectly against me, and feeling her heartbeat settling into a calmer pace against my ribs, her soft breaths steadying across my chest feels shockingly comforting.

And as we stay like this in peaceful silence, I feel my heart swell inside me. An affection I’ve never known before flickering to life. A fondness for Quinn that’s different from what I felt for her as I watched her grow up. It’s dangerously close to attraction. And I realize too late that letting Quinn get under my skin could have dangerous consequences.

Because it feels far too good to hold her close like this.

To have her in my arms.

Closing my eyes, I take another deep breath as I will away my errant thoughts. And I focus on the fact that Quinn’s stopped shaking. I should be grateful for that. Not thinking about the fact that she’s a beautiful woman and we’re in her bed.

“Lance?” Quinn whispers, and I hate how much I like when she says my name.

“Hmm?” I ask, lifting my head to look down at her.

And at the same time, she tips her chin up to meet my eyes.

Suddenly, our lips are within inches of each other’s, and my breath freezes in my lungs as the air around us crackles to life.

“Thank you,” she murmurs. “For everything.”

I should say something. Anything.

Tell her that she has nothing to thank me for. Because I would protect her without a second thought. And I know that this is my opportunity to mend the hurt I created before. But I can’t seem to summon the words. Only, this time, it’s because I can’t seem to get past the fact that Quinn’s perfect, Cupid’s bow lips are dangerously appealing. And far too close.

Her breath catches, her lips parting slightly, and when my eyes snap up to hers—as I realize I was fixating on her mouth—I find her looking at my lips. Then slowly, tentatively, she tilts her chin higher. And presses her lips to mine.

White-hot arousal blasts through my veins, turning my blood molten. And suddenly, the room feels charged with such intense sexual tension, my muscles tighten. Her mouth feels sinfully good against mine. Her cute peach-colored lips shockingly soft and malleable. I’ve kissed plenty of girls in my time. I’ve lain with more than a few.

But this, right here, kissing Quinn King, is different from anything I’ve ever known.

And though I’ve never tasted alcohol, never tried a single drug, I suddenly wonder if

this is what it feels like to be high. Because I have absolutely no control over my body.

Blood hammers through my veins, making my ears roar as my cock throbs to life. And I'm rock-hard in an instant, tenting my joggers with my intense need to know Quinn more intimately.

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A groan of intense longing rips up my throat as Quinn's soft, talented hand slides up my chest and around my neck, her fingers combing into the short hair at my nape. Her breath hitches, her lips parting with the sweet, sensual gasp.

And like the traitor it is, my tongue delves out to take advantage of the opening. Because I want to taste Quinn more than I want to continue breathing. I don't care that kissing her could very well mean the end of my life.

Right now, all I can think about is how entirely, how consumingly I want her.

And Quinn's doing absolutely nothing to slow me down. To temper this intense attraction thrumming through my veins. Instead, she uncurls slightly from her tight, defensive ball, pressing her soft breasts against my chest as she melts into me.

Cradling the back of her head, I deepen the kiss, holding Quinn's fragile body close as I devour her sweet lips. Her tongue dances out to tangle with mine, our lips moving in tandem. And when my hand slowly travels down from her tangled mass of curls to the soft curve of her lips, Quinn moans.

"I want you, Lance," she breathes against my lips, the intense desire in her soft voice leaving no room for misinterpretation. "Please...take me."

And I know I'm a goner.

Because nothing on God's green earth could stop me from following her command.

QUINN

My heart slams against my ribs in the wake of my shameless plea. I know it's wrong of me. To ask Lance to have sex with me. Of course it would go against his loyalty to my brother. It might even put him in danger if it pisses Killian off badly enough.

But I'm so intensely in love with Lance, I can't help myself.

And after getting a taste of the way he kisses...?

I feel as though he's set my very soul on fire.

And nothing is going to put that flame out. Not even my fear of the repercussions.

For the breadth of a second, I think he might tell me no. Because he pauses, his lips hovering over mine so close I can tell he's holding his breath as he makes his decision. It's pure agony. Putting myself out there like that. Throwing all preconceived, archaic notions about who's supposed to make the first move out the window on the prayer that it might work—if I start something, maybe, just maybe, Lance will want me too.

If I hadn't caught him looking at my lips, I'm not sure I ever would have been brave enough to kiss him. But God, I've never been so glad I took the risk. And that first success has made me bold. For the first time in my life, I feel brave enough to ask for what I want. To show my vulnerability and hope that I don't end up completely shattered.

And just as I feel like I've ruined the moment—blown my shot by aiming for the moon—Lance's full, powerful lips come crashing down on mine with renewed verve. Heat blasts through my core, wet excitement flooding my panties at the realization that Lance might actually want me to.

I didn't scare him away by saying what I want.

Instead, he's kissing me like I might just be the last woman on earth.

Slowly, he shifts, easing me down onto the bed so I'm lying on my back, his body pressed against the length of my side. I can feel him, like iron, digging into my thigh, and my stomach quivers with the thought of actually losing my virginity to him like I've dreamed about a thousand times.

This can't actually be happening, right?

But if this is a dream, I desperately don't want it to stop. Because after a week's worth of nightmares, I'm finally having the dream I want.

"God, I want you so bad," I moan, rolling into him and wrapping my leg around his hip so I can grind against him.

Lance releases a deep, guttural groan that almost makes me come on the spot, and I gasp when he rocks on top of me, pinning my hips to the bed with his as he braces on his forearms. His thick, throbbing erection presses adamantly against my clit as he rocks forward against me. And the zing of pleasure that races up my spine is dangerously addictive.

We're not even having sex yet, and it feels like our chemistry might just burn the house down. Whatever I thought it might be like, being with Lance, it couldn't hold a candle to this. Combing my hands into his thick head of brown locks, I keep my lips firmly trapped against his boldly stroking my tongue into his mouth in an attempt to show him how I want him. To encourage him to do the same to me with his cock.

Rough, calloused fingers slide beneath the loose fabric of my nightshirt, skating up my ribs impatiently to cup my breast in his large palm. Warmth seeps into my skin

from his intimate touch, and I arch into him, my nipple puckering in response.

“So perfect,” he growls against my lips, the deep, carnal sound sending a shiver down my spine. And then his hand is guiding my shirt higher, revealing my breasts completely.

Pulse throbbing through my veins, I lift my arms to help him, and as soon as the cool air hits my nipples, they’re tight and aching with excitement. Lance leans down, wrapping his lips around one hard nub. I cry out, overwhelmed by the intensity of sensation, the way it sends a jolt of arousal straight down to my clit.

My knees quake, my thighs quivering with anticipation as my whole body starts to throb. And then Lance’s hot lips are burning a trail down my abdomen, creeping closer to the waist of my sleep shorts. His thick fingers hook around the elastic waistband, and I pant, lifting my hips as he drags the fabric down my hips and thighs, stripping me naked in a matter of moments.

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He tosses them aside and pauses as he stares down at me. “Christ,” he rasps, the desire in his eyes so intense it might just light my skin on fire.

I feel the same way about him as I take in his rippling chest and abdomen, the way his cock presses adamantly against his joggers.

“Condom?” he growls.

Thank God for clinicals and hospitals that are always handing out freebies. And while I’ve never gone far enough to need one before, a girl can always dream. So I keep a few in my nightstand—just in case. “That drawer,” I breathe, pointing.

And my heart stutters when he rocks up off the bed momentarily. He digs quickly through the drawer, pulling out a purple foil. I have no clue if it will be the right size or even a brand he likes, and honestly, right now, I’m not sure I care. I’d let him fuck me without it I want to feel Lance inside me so badly.

Quickly stripping his sweatpants, Lance releases his impressive erection, and my mouth goes dry at the sight of his thick length. Not that I have a lot of firsthand experience to go on—okay, I have none actually—but are cocks supposed to be that large?

Heat throbs between my thighs as I watch him roll the condom down his impressive girth. Then his molten blue gaze returns to mine as he comes back to bed. Lips parted, I suck in shaky breaths as I watch him climb between my thighs. It’s now or never, and while I’m slightly terrified to actually be losing my virginity so unexpectedly, I’ve never wanted anything more desperately in my life.

Only Lance doesn't take me right away like I thought he might. Instead, he grasps one of my ankles, bringing my foot up off the bed. And gently, he kisses the fading ring of bruises from where the zip ties kept me trapped against the chair. My heart twinges to see the tender gesture.

But then his lips slowly trail up the inside of my calf, my knee, my thigh, and a fresh round of butterflies erupt in my stomach when he finds the small patch of hair at the peak of my thighs. Hot breath washes across the sensitive flesh, and I shudder at the sinfully erotic sensation. Of having Lance Knight's mouth less than an inch from my most intimate spot.

His tongue strokes out, the tip sliding along my slit as he gently parts my folds, and I nearly lose my mind at the intensely euphoric sensation. I thought it might be embarrassing—moments before, I was on the verge of feeling self-conscious. But his mouth delivering such ecstasy wipes any bashful thoughts from my mind.

“Oh God, yes!” I gasp, my fingers combing into his hair once more as I cling to him for dear life.

He releases a low, throaty sound of approval, his tongue delving more adamantly as he licks up my juices.

And then his mouth closes around my clit.

I buck off the bed, my hips levitating with the intensity of my excitement.

He's only just started to pleasure me, and yet, I can feel my climax blasting through me like an atomic bomb. Screaming his name, I come hard and fast all over Lance's tongue. And all the while, he continues to suck gently on my clit, teasing every last drop of pleasure from my body.

Then, as I collapse back onto the bed, having survived the best orgasm of my life, he slowly rises from between my thighs, a wicked smile on his glistening lips.

I've never seen this side of Lance. This dangerously tempting, sinfully predatory side. Like he's the lion and I'm the mouse caught between his paws. My stomach quivers with anticipation as he strokes one large hand down his face, cleaning my arousal from his facial hair—his incredibly soft, almost ticklish beard.

And when he leans over me, his hips settling between my thighs as he aligns our body, I think I might have just died. Whether I went to heaven or hell, I can't quite say. But wherever I am, I'll gladly stay here for eternity.

"You taste delicious," he purrs. And as if he wants me to share in the experience, he kisses me deeply, stroking his tongue between my lips.

Fresh arousal jolts through my body as I taste what must be my own tang. I don't know why that's so ridiculously sexy. But having Lance eat me out and then call me delicious might just be the single hottest thing a man has ever done to me. It's so insanely erotic, I almost don't register the slick rubber that nudges softly between my folds.

But as Lance's swollen tip finds my entrance, I'm immediately brought back to reality. Holy cow. This is really happening. I'm about to lose my virginity to the man I've been crushing on since before I had breasts.

I barely have time to wrap my mind around it before he thrusts inside me.

All the way inside of me.

And suddenly, it's all I can do not to scream.

Because dear God, he's so big, it hurts.

Clinging to him, I lock down every muscle in my body, willing myself to ride out the pain. I know this can happen—that it can hurt when the hymen breaks—and I breathe through the overwhelming sense of fear and vulnerability that washes through me unexpectedly.

But as if he senses my distress, Lance stills inside of me. Breaking our kiss, he breathes heavily as he rests his forehead against mine. “You okay?” he rasps.

Biting back a whimper, I nod.

“Sorry. I know I'm big.”

The understatement of the century. But as he gives me a moment to wrap my mind around it, my muscles start to relax. And the sharp, intense initial pain is fading. In its wake, a throbbing pulse starts between my thighs. I've never felt so full, so incredibly stretched and claimed. But damn does it feel good to be so intensely intertwined with Lance's body.

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I've wanted this for so long.

And the sense of victory—of mind-blowing relief—burns away the last lingering shadows of pain.

“I'm good,” I murmur. “Really.”

Lance nods, and his lips find mine with that same burning intensity with which he first kissed me. Heat pools in my core, stoking my arousal as he slowly starts to rock inside me. And while it's almost too many sensations at first, quickly that fades into a pleasure unlike anything I've ever known before.

“This feels so good,” I moan, my fingers digging into the thick muscles of his back as I ride the waves of pleasure that seep through me.

“So good,” he groans, his hips picking up the pace.

And as he takes me with fierce passion, it's all I can do but let him. I never knew a man could own my body so completely. But I love how he feels like he's everywhere all at once—his lips searing kisses into my flesh, his powerful hands roaming the curves of my breasts and hips, his cock filling me again and again and again.

He thrusts relentlessly inside me, and I come more than once, one orgasm swelling into the next as he seems to ignite my desire even before the last one's done.

“God, I want to make you come all night,” he groans, his hand grasping my hip, holding me in place as he pounds inside me, thrusting despite the vise grip my pussy

has around his cock.

I mowl a response, unable to form words as my third climax ripples along his length, my clit pulsing in rhythm with his powerful penetrations.

“But I don’t think I can hold out.”

He grunts, the sound both carnal and animalistic, and I know without having ever heard it before that he’s on the brink of coming as well. The thought of him coming inside me brings my excitement to a fever pitch, and I sob with the intensity of it. Wet anticipation gushes out, mingling with my juices from all the times he’s brought me to climax.

A soft snarl rips from his chest, and his hips jerk forward, near violent and erratic as he seems to lose control. And when I clamp down around his iron length, I feel him explode inside me.

Warmth floods my veins as he throbs, and I throb with him, coming once more at the realization that Lance is coming inside me. I can hardly believe how right it feels to be with him. Tangled so inextricably in his arms.

We still together, breathing heavily as the aftershocks of my orgasm squeeze his softening length. And slowly, tenderly, he eases out of me. Collapsing back onto my bed, he stares up at the ceiling, and after a moment’s hesitation, I join him.

Resting my cheek against his chest, I press my ear over his heart and listen to its steady beat.

“That was...amazing,” I murmur, contentment seeping out through my limbs and relaxing me completely. So completely, it takes me a moment to notice he doesn’t respond.

And while his arm is wrapped around my shoulders, I'm suddenly intensely aware of how still he's become.

"Lance?" I ask, rising up on my elbow so I can look at his face. My stomach plummets when I see his troubled expression. "What's wrong?" I breathe.

With a heavy sigh, Lance sits up, sliding back until his shoulders find my headboard, and his signature scowl folds his heavy brow. "I made a mistake," he says, his eyes refusing to meet mine. "I shouldn't have had sex with you."

15

LANCE

What the hell is wrong with me?

I just slept with Killian's little sister, the woman Killian trusted me to protect. I took advantage of her vulnerability and Killian's faith in me to be honorable and respectful of Quinn. And now I've gone and had sex with her.

Seriously, what is wrong with me? I must be immeasurably broken to have so completely violated the trust of people I consider as good as family. The Kings have been nothing but good to me, and how do I repay them? By having sex with Quinn when she's clearly struggling and still traumatized.

"This won't happen again," I promise her, struggling to meet her eyes as I swallow the guilt that rises like bile in my throat.

"Why not?" she asks, hurt and confusion flitting across her face as she pulls the sheets up to cover her body—her still bruised and recovering body.

Fresh guilt twists in my gut, and I'm two seconds from making a break for it. But Quinn deserves a conversation. An explanation. I owe her that at the very least. "Killian would be furious if—" I swallow convulsively. "When he finds out."

"And why the hell should it matter what Killian thinks?"

I glance sidelong at Quinn to find her cheeks a deep shade of crimson in her fury. "Because Killian's like my brother. I have no right to be looking at you at all. Let alone touching you." I close my eyes, grinding my teeth as my choice of words sends a vivid memory flooding into my brain—of the pleasure I felt at exploring Quinn's beautiful body, every silken inch of her feminine curves.

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“You can’t be serious,” she snaps, her arms crossing defensively over her chest. “What we just did...what we have felt more right than anything I’ve ever imagined.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a devil takes note of the fact that she just admitted to having imagined something like this happening between us. But I refuse to read into it. Because I’m so deep up a creek without a paddle, I can’t allow myself to think that way.

This isn’t just some beautiful girl I slept with on a whim. This is my best friend’s sister. A girl thirteen years younger than me. She might be a strong, intelligent woman, but I had no right to take advantage of her like that. To fuck her when she’s clearly going through something. There must be a special place in hell reserved for men like me.

I can’t just take back what I did. Pretend it didn’t happen. How the hell am I supposed to ever look Killian in the eyes again? It doesn’t matter if that was the best sex of my life. If it felt more meaningful than any kind of intimacy I’ve ever had before. It was wholly and utterly wrong of me.

The need to run from my shame is so intense, I roll out of bed instinctually. Quickly stripping the condom, I toss it in the waste bin. Then bending down, I snatch up my joggers and quickly start to dress.

“Lance, wait,” Quinn insists, her voice catching.

My heart twists at the sound of her vulnerability, and I can’t help but look up to meet her sad green eyes. Then my brain registers the small rust-colored stain on her sheets.

My gaze falls, and my stomach plummets. That's definitely blood.

"Shit, Quinn, did I hurt you?" What if I had sex with her too soon after her kidnapping? What if she's still injured and I exacerbated an injury? But where?

I scan her partially covered body, searching for the source of blood. But all I can find is an intense blush spreading across Quinn's cheeks and neck as she clutches the sheets more firmly against her chest. "No," she murmurs, suddenly unable to meet my eyes.

The answer hits me like a train, knocking the oxygen from my lungs. Please, please, let me be wrong. "You weren't..." I swallow convulsively. "Were you a virgin before we...?"

"Yes," she whispers, her blush spreading to the very roots of her strawberry-blond hair.

Jesus. I didn't just sleep with my best friend's little sister. I took her virginity. I never had high hopes for making it to heaven, but now I'm starting to wonder if hell would even accept me.

Combing my fingers into my hair, I yank forcefully at the roots. "Damn, Quinn, I'm so sorry. I never should have slept with you?—"

But before I can finish groveling, the night gets exponentially worse...as Quinn bursts into tears once more.

I honestly don't know what to do. Maybe I really did hurt her even though she said I didn't. It shreds my heart to see her cry like that. To know I'm the one responsible. "Quinn..." I rasp, my throat tight with anxiety.

I reach for her slowly, gently because I don't want to frighten her, and as I ease onto the bed, unsure of how to comfort her, she doesn't pull away.

"Why are you crying?" I ask, baffled, desperate for a way to make it stop.

"You just told me that having sex with me was a mistake, that you never should have slept with me," she sniffles, wiping furiously at her wet cheeks as she glares at me. "So, basically, you're rejecting me because your friendship with Killian is more important. You regret being with me. And here I was thinking that was the best night of my life. Am I really that bad at it?"

A fresh wave of tears spills onto her face, and she buries it in her hands, the sheet slipping down until it's dangerously revealing.

"Oh, Quinn...No, that's not what I meant at all." I pull her into my arms, wrapping the sheet more securely around her body as I tuck her head beneath my chin. And I dig deep for the strength to comfort her platonically when her beautiful body is all but naked in my arms. "It's not just about feeling bad for having had sex with Killian's sister. I feel awful for taking your virginity without even knowing. It's a big deal, a special moment you only experience once, and I was..." I swallow the fresh wave of guilt rising in my throat. "I would have been more gentle if I'd known," I murmur, ashamed at the kind of first-time experience I just gave her. I must have hurt her. Looking back, I know I did, because I wasn't careful with her at all. "And now I've gone and made you cry...I'm doing this all wrong."

Agonizing shame pounds through my body, reminding me of how horribly I failed as Quinn's protector.

She pulls away from me, putting distance between us, and as painful as it is, I let her go.

But she doesn't go far—just far enough to look me in the eyes once more. “I don't think so,” she states, making my brow buckle. “I don't think you've done anything wrong. I've wanted you for so long...This has been the best night of my life—or at least, it was until you ruined it by telling me that having sex with me was a huge mistake.”

My stomach knots at the same time as my heart lifts. Because I'm grateful that at least Quinn doesn't regret anything that happened. That she doesn't blame me for hurting her or taking advantage of her vulnerable state. That doesn't make it right, but at least it makes me feel a little less guilty.

And hearing that she's wanted me for a long time, sets free an odd tingling sensation at the base of my spine. A feeling not entirely unpleasant, though I do my best not to pay it any mind.

“Killian doesn't get to rule my decisions about who I want,” she insists, her green eyes lighting with that infamous King fire. That rebellious streak that says no one and nothing will lay down the law for them. “And he shouldn't get a say in who you want to be with either. If we want to be together, we're two fully mature, consenting adults. And there's nothing wrong with being attracted to each other.”

Technically speaking, she's not wrong. I might be her foster brother, but we don't share any actual blood. But Killian is as good as my family, and I feel like I'm betraying him to want Quinn the way I do right now. Like a man wants a woman, without reservation, and with every bone in his body.

I know Killian wouldn't want this.

He'll hate me for laying a finger on his sister.

He might just kill me over it.

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I could see it in his eyes the day he found me in this very room after Quinn stitched me back up.

Sleeping with her was a betrayal to our friendship, and I don't know that I can forgive myself for that—even if I want Quinn an astonishing amount, with an intensity I never even dared to think about until tonight.

“Lance, stop thinking about the guilt for just a second,” Quinn insists, scooting closer to me on the bed as her green eyes hold mine captive. “Just tell me this, do you want me?”

The question knocks the wind from my lungs, and for a moment, I'm utterly speechless.

I don't know how to respond.

And that intense lump in my throat returns, threatening to choke me.

16

QUINN

The silence that stretches between us is agonizing. And Lance's hesitation obliterates me, opening a gaping hole in my chest as I realize that my feelings for him are probably unrequited. What happened between us tonight must have been entirely physical on his part—instinctive, nothing to do with who I am. Only that a woman kissed him and he was aroused.

And suddenly, his guilt makes sense.

He feels bad because he knows he feels nothing for me.

Meanwhile, I just bared my soul, hoping he might see me differently now.

That he might want me.

I can't believe how stupid I was, how naive.

Lance's deep-blue eyes leave mine, his chin dropping. And it's the last nail in the coffin. He doesn't want to watch my heart shatter into a million pieces when he turns me down.

Damn it, Quinn. You never should have said anything.

Tears sting the corners of my eyes, and I feel myself withdrawing inside myself. Because this pain is far less bearable than having someone beat me with a riding crop or threaten to chop me into little pieces. This is someone I care about holding my heart in their hands and tossing it aside like a dirty diaper.

"I have no right to want you," Lance rasps, his deep voice hoarse with tension.

I know how hard it is for him to speak sometimes, and that only makes this worse—because I'm the one who put us in this impossible situation. And while I want to be mad at him for hurting me, I don't think I can. Because even though he's done nothing wrong, he's trying to shoulder the blame.

He swallows convulsively, his neck muscles bulging with the effort to speak, and he forces his gaze back to mine. "I haven't right to want you," he repeats more vehemently. "But that doesn't seem to be stopping me."

It takes a half a second for my brain to catch up. Because I honestly didn't think that was what he would say. And then my heart swells to bursting in my chest. A surprised laugh jumps from my lips, and I smile tearfully at what is probably the sweetest thing Lance has ever uttered in my presence.

And though I know he feels guilty—conflicted about his feelings—I can't help myself.

I fling my arms around his neck, dropping the sheets that cover my breasts and letting the fabric between us fall away as I kiss him. He tenses, his powerful arms bunching around me as his strong fingers splay across my rib cage. Like he's unsure if he should be catching me or pushing me away.

Then, his lips soften against mine. His arms slowly snake more firmly around my body. And he gathers me close as he kisses me back with scintillating heat.

This time, our make out session is slower, more tender. His lips move with mine, exploring me rather than devouring me, body and soul. And while the pace is distinctly different from before, I can't say I like one or the other more.

The gentle way his hands cradle my body makes me feel astonishingly cherished. Like he intends to worship me this time, rather than own me. And it feels both sweet and incredibly erotic.

His arms tighten around my waist, lifting me as he pulls me closer. And beneath the sheets, I sling a leg over his thighs, straddling him. My core throbs, my clit aching with fresh anticipation as I feel his thick length growing, hardening beneath me.

“God, I want you, Lance,” I murmur. I'll always want him. I don't know why, but he's had my heart from the moment I met him. And I've loved him every day since.

“I want you too,” he breathes, drawing back from my lips to trail kisses down my neck.

I gasp, my nipples hardening as goose bumps rise across my flesh. My core tightens, and I roll my hips forward instinctively. Lance groans, the sound low and sultry and drawing a hot, gushing arousal to slick my already dripping pussy.

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His tongue trails a searing path across my collarbone and between my breasts, and as I arch into the erotic feeling, Lance's hands roam down my waist to palm my ass. His long fingers grip and knead the full flesh, and he pulls my hips more firmly against him, grinding into me.

I'm tender from our first time around, and still, it feels so good, I respond eagerly. Rocking forward to rub myself against him. His lips close around my nipple, and I shudder with the intense arousal. Goose bumps flash across my neck and arms, my taut nubs suddenly hard enough to cut glass. A knot of excitement tightens in my belly, and a jolt of electric pleasure races up my spine every time his talented tongue swirls around the tight, throbbing pebble.

And when he slowly starts to suck, I nearly come undone.

"Oh God," I moan, rolling forward more adamantly with my hips.

One muscular arm wraps around my hip as Lance's other hand slides between us to palm my free breast. And the combination of his warm hand on one, his wet lips and teasing tongue on the other launches me unexpectedly toward climax.

You can't come just from someone playing with your breasts...can you?

I think I might be dangerously close to proving you can. I shiver, my fingers combing into Lance's hair, mussing it in such a sexy way as I cling to his beautiful chestnut locks.

And when he switches sides, cupping my breast so he can close his lips around the

new tight flesh, I give a sultry moan. Then he lightly starts to nibble. And I cry out as my orgasm blasts through me with hurricane force.

“Mmm,” Lance hums appreciatively. The hand cupping my breast travels slowly down my abdomen to the peak of my thighs. His fingers brush across my throbbing clit, then stroke between my slick folds. “You’re so wet and ready for me,” he moans.

Breathless and tingling as the euphoria ripples through me, I nod.

And Lance’s responding growl of approval makes my core clench deliciously.

Then he rolls, trading positions with me as he puts me on my back once more. My legs wrap around his waist, and I cling to him as his lips find mine, kissing me with soft, fiery passion. And his fingers continue to coax my slick slit, swirling around my clit to stimulate the aftershocks of my orgasm.

I pant heavily, my breaths clashing with his as I kiss him back between desperate gasps for oxygen. I’ve never known anyone could make me feel like this. Like everything else in the world has vanished, and all that remains is my pleasure and his presence.

I feel like a puppet on his string, and I would gladly dance to whatever song he wants to play.

My eyes widen as he eases one finger inside of me, gently hooking the digit and stroking against a sensitive spot that makes me want to squirm. My lips part, my head falling back as my pussy tightens around the sudden intrusion. And though my walls are tender from the beating they just took, I desperately want to come.

“That’s it, beautiful. Show me what you want,” he coaxes.

Lance's voice is so deep and manly and dangerously erotic, it alone might be capable of making me come. And in the recesses of my mind, I note that this might be the most he's ever spoken to me. It makes the night feel more special, his commands carrying more weight.

"There," I moan, grinding against the heel of his palm as he eases a second finger inside of me. "Oh God, please don't stop."

He does as I plead, his fingers curling softly inside me to find that special place that must be my G-spot. And all the while, our tongues twist in a tantalizing dance, awakening a fire in my belly. It's driving me wild—this stimulation that seems to give my body a life of its own. I buck and squirm beneath him, loving the way his hips trap me against the bed. And still, his fingers fuck me gently.

Scientifically, there's no known limit to how many orgasms a woman can have at a time. But as my next one rips through me, I wonder if we might just test that limit tonight. I've completely lost track of how many times he's made me come. And still, my hunger feels insatiable. All I want is Lance to be inside me, filling me up as he makes us one.

"Please, Lance," I whimper, grinding my hips forward to indicate what I want as my walls milk his fingers.

Easing them out of me, he brings his glistening middle and ring finger to his lips. And sucks the slick arousal from them. I watch with intense lust, licking my lips unwittingly in my desire to participate.

"Tell me what you want, beautiful," he rasps.

"I want your cock inside me," I breathe, all sense of shame or modesty thrown out the window.

Lance hums, the sound practically a purr, and a moment later, he shoves his joggers back down his hips. Then he rolls us once more so he's sitting up and I'm on top of him.

His lips gently tease the curve of my neck as his silken cockhead finds my entrance. And he eases me slowly, carefully onto his massive length.

I groan through the aching sense of fullness. It's almost enough to be painful. But I'm so wet with arousal, he slides easily inside me. And it feels so dangerously good this time, I'm on the brink of coming with the first deep penetration.

Gasping, I roll my hips, unable to control myself as I let him sink a few inches deeper. Being on top gives me a bit more control and makes both the pleasure and the pain much more manageable.

Still, the orgasm that ripples through me catches me completely by surprise.

And suddenly, I'm throbbing around his silk-skinned iron length, milking him as my body begs him to come deep inside me.

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Lance groans, the sound near agony as his arm tightens around my ribcage like a vise, and he pins me in place, holding me firmly on his swollen length as his jaw muscles flex taut beneath his dark facial hair.

“What’s wrong?” I gasp, sensing the sudden tension in his powerful body.

“I forgot a condom.”

17

LANCE

I could kick myself for being so reckless. At least I haven’t come yet. But the intense pleasure of feeling Quinn climaxing all over my cock almost made me lose my load inside her. And it’s taking every ounce of self-restraint to keep her still right now so I don’t do just that.

“Did you...?” she asks breathlessly, a shiver racing down her spine and making my balls ache with the need to pour my seed inside her.

“No—just...give me a second,” I rasp.

Quinn nods, and I can tell she’s trying to be as still as possible. But the tantalizing way her breath fans across my shoulder and neck is making it nearly impossible to rein myself back in. Finally, I grasp her hips and slowly ease out of her, lifting her off my painfully hard length.

“I have more...” she says, leaning toward the bedside table.

I balance her as she opens the drawer and pulls out another foil packet. She tears it and gets to work rolling the rubber down my length with a confidence that’s far from virginal. Then again, this is Quinn we’re talking about. She knows everything about nursing and the body. Of course she would know how to put on a condom without ever having done so before.

And damn she puts it on with such perfect, talented fingers. Her caress makes my cock throb, my swollen tip twitching with the need to be back inside her.

“There,” she breathes, her jade eyes dilating to a beautiful shade of emerald as they meet mine.

I should have taken advantage of our momentary reprieve. Found the strength to put a stop to what we’re doing. Resisted Quinn’s intoxicating beauty. I don’t like the idea of betraying Killian, and having sex with my best friend’s kid sister is doing just that.

But the truth is, Quinn’s no longer a kid. She’s a beautiful, intelligent, funny young woman who’s impossible not to want. And as she guides my aching erection back to her entrance, I can’t stop it. I need to feel her wrapped around me more than I need my next breath.

I groan with the euphoria of her warm wetness stretching around my length. And though it doesn’t feel quite as good as being inside her raw, it’s still sinfully enticing. Yet, in the back of my mind, I feel a strange sense of disappointment over not having the pleasure of coming inside her.

What is wrong with me?

I can’t seem to stop asking myself that.

But pouring cum inside Quinn would be about the worst thing I could do. So why do I want to so desperately?

Fingers pressing into the soft flesh of her hips, I support Quinn's light weight, guiding her as she rides me. And steadily, she finds a rhythm that she can sustain. Her fingers comb into my hair, tugging softly at the roots as she braces against my shoulders with her forearms.

Her hard nipples brush against my chest, the softness of her breasts a delicious contrast that hits my pulse like an electric shock.

And all the while, her pussy ripples around me, so tight that it continues to remind me that I'm her first—her only. Something deep and instinctual inside me feels a great sense of satisfaction about that fact. Sick, I know, when I have no right to covet my friend's sister—to even think about her the way I am.

But something's changed between us. And I'm not sure we can go back from this.

"You're so big," Quinn moans as her hips roll forward, taking me deeper into her depths.

"You're so damn tight," I growl. "I'm not hurting you?"

Quinn releases a breathy laugh and shakes her head. "In case you haven't noticed, I can't seem to stop coming. You feel so good."

A low snarl of satisfaction rips from my chest, and I shift, changing positions once again as I put Quinn on her back. She moans, her green eyes soft as she watches me, trusting that she's going to like whatever I have in mind.

I hook one of her thin ankles over each of my shoulders, and slowly, I lean into her,

folding her in half. Quinn gasps, her eyes flying wide as I penetrate her even deeper—finding that hidden spot that drives her wild.

“Come for me again, beautiful,” I command, holding her legs against my chest as I rock my hips into her with slow, deliberate motions.

Quinn cries out, her head falling back and her fingers tangling in the sheets as she does what I say. I groan at the strength of her orgasm. The way her body ripples down my length, gripping me with viselike strength. I keep rolling my hips, maintaining a gentle but deep penetration as I feel her fall apart, her legs quivering against me.

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Her back arches up off the bed, her breasts rising beautifully toward the ceiling. And I love the sight of her silky skin, dotted with adorable freckles.

“It feels so good,” Quinn sobs, her breaths ragged as she rides out another release.

She flushes beautifully each time she comes, and I love watching the way her eyes dilate. Her lips are swollen from my kisses, which were wild and adamant and completely careless of how delicate she is. I’ve taken everything from her tonight—all she offered and more. And right now, as I worship the perfection of her sweet pussy, her beautiful body, I can’t bring myself to feel guilty.

Because she’s everything. She’s all I’ll ever want.

And that thought terrifies me most of all.

Releasing her legs slowly, I ease them back onto the bed, letting her relax as I guide her sexy thighs open once more. And she welcomes me in, reaching up to wrap her fingers around the back of my neck so she can guide my lips to hers.

“So perfect,” I murmur, running my palm down the silken skin between her breasts. And as I rock inside her, I continue to explore her body until my thumb brushes across the sensitive point at the peak of her thighs.

Quinn gasps, her body tightening around me and making me groan.

“Oh God, I’m coming,” she breathes, her Cupid’s bow lips forming a soft O.

Her eyes roll back into her head, her chest rising, and she squirms beneath me with such verve, it makes my balls tighten. But I want to make her come one more time because I haven't nearly had my fill. And if this is the only night I get with Quinn, I want to make it count.

Panting, she releases the sexiest mewl of pleasure as her pussy throbs around my length gripping me again and again. My muscles strain with the effort of holding out—holding on just a little longer. Then, when her dangerously alluring aftershocks finally subside, she collapses back against the bed, completely spent.

I groan, my balls sore and bruised from holding back for so long, and I think if she touched them, I'd fill her up with so much cum, it would come dripping back out.

Gently, I ease out of her, looking for any sign that she's too tender to keep going. But instead, Quinn releases a whimper of protest.

"What are you ... ?"

"You're tired," I murmur. I can tell in the way her legs tremble even as they relax against the mattress.

"I want more," she moans. "And you're not done."

Chuckling darkly, I roll Quinn onto her side and settle onto the bed beside her. "I can fix that," I promise, brushing my lips along the shell of her ear.

She shivers, and I can feel the goose bumps erupt along her spine as I press her back against my chest. Then I ease my swollen tip between her perfect ass cheek and find her dripping entrance from behind.

Quinn's hips roll back instinctively as soon as she feels what I'm doing, and her tight

pussy swallows my cock once more without her having to work nearly so hard.

Brushing her thick curls over her shoulder, I trail kisses along the back of her neck.

And I reach around her full hip to find that small pearl of flesh between her thighs.

Quinn gasps, her back arching as she takes in all the various forms of stimulation. And fresh excitement gushes around my cock. I gather it on my fingertips, swirling it around her clit. The sound of pleasure she releases is so low and sultry, I know she's going to come for me one more time—even if she's exhausted.

And my cock twitches inside her with the anticipation of feeling her climax again.

This feels so good. So right. Holding Quinn in my arms, pleasuring her from every angle as I savor the perfection of her sensual side. I always thought of Quinn as cute. Adorable.

But now, she's something else entirely.

She's dangerously intoxicating.

Alluring.

Seductive.

Even in her innocence.

I never once looked at Quinn with lust before. But now, I can't stop thinking about her like that. About how I might elicit her next moan of pleasure, her next addicting release. She has me harder than iron and so swollen with the aching need to stay inside her, to fill her with my cock and make her mine.

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“Lance,” she moans, reaching back to grasp the nape of my neck over her shoulder.

And as I fuck her slowly, sensually from behind, teasing her clit with soft circles of my fingers, I gently bite down on her earlobe.

This time she screams my name.

And as her walls clamp down around my rock-hard length, I explode inside her. My hips jerk forward with the intensity of my orgasm, pressing into her depths as she comes at the same time. Burst after burst rushes from me, flooding the condom until it’s dripping out around my emptied balls. And I feel almost lightheaded with the euphoria of coming inside Quinn for the second time tonight.

It’s been a while since I’ve slept with a woman. But I’ve never slept with a woman like Quinn before. And as I hold her closer, spooning her from behind while her pussy milks every last drop of cum from my throbbing cock, I know I’ll never sleep with another woman like her.

She feels so perfect in my arms—just the right fit and so incredibly comfortable. The rose and strawberry scent of her skin is so fresh and inviting. And as she relaxes against me, her body melting into mine, she runs her talented nurse’s fingers through the hair of my forearm, tickling the skin lightly and bringing me dangerously close to a purr.

“Lance?” she murmurs in the peaceful quiet that follows.

“Hmm?” I nuzzle closer to her silken hair, fighting the urge to fall asleep.

“I don’t want this to end.”

“Okay.”

Shifting in my arms, Quinn twists her shoulders and neck so she can look back at me. “Okay, it doesn’t have to?” she presses.

And though I know I should end it before things get completely out of hand, the truth is, I don’t want it to end either. I don’t want this to be the only night I get to hold her in my arms. I want the privilege to continue kissing her. And if I don’t take it, someone else will. Because Quinn is incredible. No doubt there’s a line out the door of men waiting for her to date them. But for some reason, she wants me. And I can’t bring myself to throw away that opportunity. No matter how mad Killian is going to be. No matter how much damage my actions have caused.

“Yes,” I agree.

Quinn squeals, the sound so adorably excited, it’s almost childish. She tips her chin up to kiss me once more, making my softening cock twitch inside her. And she moans appreciatively in response. Then she snuggles back against my chest, getting comfortable once more.

“But we need to talk to Killian,” I state.

Quinn releases a heavy sigh. “I know. But...maybe we should wait. Just a little while. He’s got a lot on his plate right now. And I know he’s worried after what happened to me.”

It’s my turn to sigh, and my shoulders find that familiar weight of finding the right path in murky water. “Okay. But soon,” I insist, because every day I look into Killian’s eyes and don’t tell him will be another betrayal.

QUINN

Kissing Lance has opened the floodgates, and now, I can't seem to get enough of him. Late at night, in the car before school, even on a few early afternoons when my brother won't be home—I'm ready to jump his bones every chance I get.

And to my pure, unadulterated delight, Lance seems just as eager to be with me.

After a lifetime of pining for the silent, brooding man on the periphery of my life, I can't believe he's mine. And God, I'm loving every minute of it. Thankfully, Killian has made spending time with him easier than ever, because my behemoth of a bodyguard is basically my shadow throughout my everyday life.

He still scowls.

A lot.

Particularly when my guy friends say hi as we're walking across campus. And I note the way Lance often places a possessive hand on the small of my back—as if he's silently marking his territory. But I have to admit, I kind of like seeing this more possessive and fiercely protective side of him.

I always knew he had Killian's back. And I've seen Lance in the aftermath of enough brawls—and heard enough stories about them—to know he's an impressive fighter. But knowing that he's the one keeping me safe makes me feel that much freer to return to my normal life.

And with two weeks' worth of nightmare-free sleep under my belt, I feel like a new woman. Who knew Lance would be the big teddy bear dreamcatcher that would keep

my attackers at bay both physically and in my subconscious?

I feel better than I have in my life. And yet, I can't help but feel a bit guilty for being so happy. Because I know it's hard on Lance to keep our relationship a secret. And as my professor drones on at the front of my pathophysiology class, I can tell it's on my silent protector's mind. He sits motionless beside me, his eyes flicking toward the door every few moments. But his scowl is deeper, the corners of his delectable lips curving down slightly. And I want to make it better.

"Remember, you have a quiz Monday," Professor Lang says, snapping me back to the present, and I realize I've been thinking so hard about Lance that I didn't hear the last five minutes of her lecture. Maybe Tina will let me borrow her notes to see what I missed.

The professor excuses us with her usual nod, and as she turns to her stack of papers, the students start to rise, collecting their books and backpacks and streaming toward the doors.

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Lance rises as well, following me from the class with his typical silent swagger.

No one else casts him those sidelong glances anymore. Whether that's because they're too scared to get caught, they've decided he's a massive nursing school student, or they actually flat-out asked and found out he's here for my protection, my classmates simply part around him now, giving him—and me—plenty of space as we walk down the hall.

And though I know I have one more class before I'm done for the day, I keep my eye out for an opening. Then I grasp Lance's hand and pull him into a dark classroom.

"Quinn," he says, a word of warning entering his tone as he follows me inside. His eyes scan the vacant space, naturally looking for any threats, though I seriously doubt the Agostis would be stupid enough to try and take me in such a public space.

"Lance," I tease back, mimicking his warning tone.

"What are you doing?"

"You looked miserable in pathophysiology, so I thought I'd cheer you up," I say coyly, playfully reaching for his belt.

"You know why," he insists, capturing my wrists and removing my hands from their dirty task. But he pulls me close, wrapping an arm around my waist to dampen any sting of rejection.

I do know why. It's the same reason every time. And though we've talked about how

to handle the situation on multiple occasions, I just don't feel like the timing's quite right.

Lance still wants to tell Killian straight out, but I think we need to ease him into it, find the right time. Probably after Killian's had time to cool down about the Italians kidnapping me and the fighting isn't making him work insane hours.

Because I know my brother. There's not a chance in hell he's going to take this news well. And I at least want him rested and well-fed to give Lance a chance of survival.

"We'll tell him soon," I insist. "He's had a hard week."

He really has. I know that tensions are escalating between him and Lucian since the Kings haven't backed down. And I feel worse knowing that's partially my fault. Before, they were just providing backup to the Sokolov sisters. Now, they've gone and exacted revenge for what Lucian's men did to me.

And while it's a relief to know that the men who hurt me are six feet under—I don't like that Killian's been coming home around midnight for the past week at least.

Lance sighs, his shoulders slumping. "I know. And I trust your judgment. We can wait if you think it's best. But we need to be careful, Quinn," he says, giving me a pointed look. "The last thing I want is for Killian to find out accidentally."

"He won't," I insist. "Promise. Especially not here, on campus. He trusts me. He trusts you to take care of me. He won't have any spies lurking about." I flash Lance a daring smile and let my hands run down the ripple washboard abs he's holding me firmly against. "Come on. Lighten up," I murmur, fluttering my eyelashes at him.

And though he releases a low, rumbling growl, this time when I find his belt, he doesn't stop me.

I've never been like this before. So hopped up on libido that I'm willing to be late to class. All so I can get a taste of his glorious cock. But there's something so thrilling about having Lance all to myself. Of knowing that if I start something, he'll finish it.

And while he's still struggling with the guilt of keeping it from Killian, I hope that once we get past that last hurdle, he might even be the one to drag me into a room and ravish me of his own volition.

Pants undone, I pull them down over his hips and thighs as I kneel, and my mouth starts to water as soon as his cock springs free. He's already rock-hard and eager for me, and I love that. It quells the last lingering doubts that rise in my chest every time I start to wonder how he feels about me. A product of having yearned for him in secret for so long, I think.

"Quinn," he warns, and the deep bass of his voice sends a tremor through my body.

"Yes, Lance?" I breathe. Then I grasp the base of his swollen shaft and guide the weeping tip toward my open mouth.

He groans, his deep-blue eyes rolling into the back of his head as I wrap my lips around his mushroom tip. I lick the drop of salty precum there and press my thighs together as excitement dampens my panties.

"You want me to fuck you right here?" he rasps, his voice shifting into that delicious kind of husk that means there's no turning back now.

"Mm-hmm," I hum around his hard length, taking him all the way into my mouth.

He grunts, his fingers combing into my hair as he pulls it back from my face. Then he slowly guides his cock farther between my lips, seeing how much of him I can take. I'm still working on the gag reflex part. I have about as much experience in this part

of my life as I do actual sex. But Lance is probably the sexiest teacher I'll ever have. And I'm an eager student.

"Good girl," he murmurs, stroking my hair as his cock hits the back of my throat.

I swallow convulsively, and he groans as I tighten around his thick tip. Then he slips in just a bit further. The heat in his eyes turns my blood molten, and I inhale through my nose as I work his length slowly in and out. I swirl my tongue around his tip.

"You're getting so good at that," he praises, running the back of his knuckles over my cheek. Then he takes my hair in his hand once more to extract himself from my mouth. "But you have a class to get to, and we're not leaving until you come," he murmurs.

Pulling me up to my feet, Lance spins me so fast, I yelp. Pressing my hands to the wall over my head, he faces me away from him. And he slides the soft fabric of my blue maxi dress up my hips until he finds the waistline of my panties.

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He pulls them down to my knees in one swift motion. Then his foot finds the inside of mine as he spreads my legs. I gasp at the authoritative way he positions me, taking charge of the suddenly spicy situation.

“Don’t make a sound,” he breathes against my ear, his lips brushing my lobe before he takes it lightly between his teeth.

I bite my lips hard, swallowing the whimper that threatens to escape me as he bites down. And the now-familiar sound of a condom packet ripping makes my heart hammer.

Then his hard tip is at my entrance as one powerful hand finds my hip, and he slides inside me with one powerful thrust. I can’t help the lusty groan that rushes from my nose, and I lean my cheek against the wall, bracing myself as tingling bliss crackles up my spine.

I love it when he takes me like this—hard and unapologetic, like he just can’t get inside me fast enough. And while I know it has to be a quickie if I don’t want to miss the start of class, I have to admit, I really like it when Lance doesn’t hold back.

“You’re so damn irresistible,” he groans beside my ear. “Why do you insist on driving me crazy?”

I love it when he talks dirty to me. Honestly, the bedroom might be where Lance speaks the most. And his voice is just so deep and manly and arousing. Swallowing down I moan as my walls tighten, I look back over my shoulder at the blue-eyed Adonis fucking me.

His lips come crashing down on mine, his tongue sweeping into my mouth without waiting for permission. I squirm back against him with my hips, always wanting more of him even though he fills me up to the edge of what I can handle.

Snaking his free hand around my body, he finds my clit with his fingers. I cry out, and I'm grateful when he swallows the sound, sealing our lips together in a fierce kiss.

His pace is relentless, his powerful body all around me, overwhelming me, stimulating me as I breathe in his masculine scent. And already I'm on the brink of coming. Because giving him head wasn't just fun. It was intensely exciting.

I can feel his cock stiffening, growing impossibly larger inside me as he nears his own release. And the thrill of knowing I can drive him to this point of frenzy launches me over the edge. I gasp as my climax washes through my veins, and it takes every ounce of willpower not to scream with pleasure.

Lance releases one low, carnal grunt, his hips shoving forward as he pins me against the wall. And then his cock starts to pulse in rhythm with my throbbing pussy.

Heat blossoms in my chest to feel him come at the same time as me. And my orgasm is so intense, I can feel my slick juices leaking out to coat my thighs.

We're both breathing heavily as Lance breaks the kiss. And his eyes burn into mine with an insatiable lust. But for now, that will have to be enough. Leaning down, he slides my panties back up my thighs, and goose bumps rise in the wake of his fingertips. Then he lets my dress fall back around my hips as he steps back to remove his condom and tuck himself away.

"You're wicked, Quinn King," he breathes, capturing my jaw in his soft clutch. Then he kisses me to show me exactly what he means.

LANCE

Taking a deep breath, I knock lightly on Killian's office door because, despite it being Sunday evening, he's still hard at work.

"Yeah?"

Steeling myself, I turn the knob and enter his modern home office. With a wall of windows on one side, he has a great view out to the water and the beach the tide comes crashing onto. And his glass-top desk and spacious decor make the room feel open and light—even when it's nearing ten o'clock.

He doesn't usually use this room as his office. O'Laoghair's is the Irish pub whose back room we typically use as something of an unofficial headquarters. But he's been working so many late nights the past week, this is where he works when he's burning the midnight oil.

And I hate to see him at it again.

Especially after the week I've had.

My job has been a cakewalk. More than that. These past two weeks have been the best of my life. Guarding Quinn hardly feels like work at all, in truth. I've even started spending every night in Quinn's room because she seems to sleep soundly when I hold her in my arms. And while that makes my feelings for her continue to grow stronger with each passing day, I still sneak out in the early morning hours because I don't want Killian to find me in her bed.

There would be no worse way for him to find out about us.

To find me luxuriating in the pleasures of playing his sister's bodyguard.

And all the while, the conflict with the Italians keeps heating up. Don Lucian is holding his ground against the King-Sokolov alliance better than we ever would have anticipated. Which is why I'm here. Because even if Quinn wants to wait to tell him about us, I can't keep standing by and watching as the fight gets bloodier without me.

"You have a minute?" I ask, standing in the doorway, for once feeling like I might be intruding on my foster brother's space.

Killian looks surprised, his eyebrows rising toward his head of blond curls. And those infamous green King eyes study me with far too much perception. "Of course."

He gestures to a chair on the other side of his desk, and I step inside, letting the door swing closed. Coming to talk to Killian almost feels like a betrayal to Quinn. I know she wouldn't like it if she knew why I was here. But if I continue to say nothing, I think my guilt might just eat me alive.

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“What’s up?” Killian asks when I don’t dive right in.

That familiar hint of an Irish brogue tinges his tone. He picked it up from his father, who came to New York from the Emerald Isle as a first-generation immigrant. I’ve always envied it a little—the accent that all the King boys got from their father. He was a good man, and I would have liked to carry a little more of him along with me.

But I never really picked it up. By the time the family took me in, my way of speaking was set in stone. I’m a New Yorker. Nothing else. I do kind of like that Quinn’s accent is even less perceptible. It makes me feel oddly closer to her, even though I know it’s because she missed out on some meaningful time with her father.

“Lance?” Killian asks, drawing me from my thoughts, and I realize I never even took the chair he offered.

“Sorry,” I mutter, slumping into my seat. “I know you’ve got a lot on your mind. But I think it’s time you took me off babysitting duty.” It feels odd saying it that way, and I don’t like the taste of the words as soon as they leave my tongue. But that’s what Killian always calls what I’m doing for Quinn, so I know he’ll get my meaning. “I can make a bigger difference helping with your dirty work. I know how to find the Agostis’ weaknesses,” I insist, leaning forward on my elbows as I plead my case.

Killian sighs, closing his eyes as he rubs his temples. And I don’t know that I’ve ever seen him look this tired before. I don’t like it. And I like it even less that I haven’t been by his side to shoulder the burden.

“No,” Killian says finally. “I need to know Quinn’s safe. And you’re the only one I

can trust with that task.” He holds up a hand to silence me as I tense, ready to argue. “I agree, you’re also the best man for the job when it comes to teaching people to respect the King name. And if this were our fight, believe me, I’d be putting your talents as the Mad Knight to full use.”

His lips quirk as he uses the nickname I’ve earned over the years—one that the Kings’ enemies gave me and it somehow stuck. I can’t say I mind it. And Killian always gets a kick out of it because, to him, it makes me sound like one of those armor-clad, sword-swinging warriors who’s gone on some kind of rampage. Not that far off, really—only I don’t wear metal, and I prefer knives.

“So use me,” I insist, feeling that familiar itch for bloodlust when I think of Lucian Agosti and his men. I still haven’t taken my pound of flesh for what they did.

“No. This is Tatiana’s fight. She’s right. We’re just here to back her up. That’s what I promised to do, and taking charge will only hurt her claim to Boris’s throne. She needs to prove she’s a leader in her own right, or her men will never respect her.”

Sighing, I slump back in my chair. I hate feeling so useless—especially when I’m riddled with guilt over the fact that I’m keeping secrets from my best friend.

“I promise, I’ll get you off babysitting duty as soon as I can,” Killian says. “But in the meantime, you’re the only one I can trust with Quinn’s life. So please don’t feel like it’s a demotion.”

Killian’s words gut me because he clearly doesn’t understand why I’m struggling. Protecting Quinn feels far from a demotion—it feels like a vacation from my reality. The best damn vacation I’ve ever been on. And in the meantime, I’ve left Killian stranded on an island all alone, fending for himself when he thought I had his back.

I’m a horrible friend.

And an abysmal excuse for a brother.

“I told my lab partner I would meet her for one drink,” Quinn says as we make our way toward the hospital parking lot.

“Tonight?” I ask, trying to keep the tension from my tone.

But the look she gives me says I failed miserably. “Jenny’s been asking for weeks, and I feel like I owe her a drink at the very least after she basically carried our group project while I was recovering.”

I get where she’s coming from. And normally, I wouldn’t mind staying out a little longer. I’m glad she feels comfortable going out in public, doing activities she always insisted upon doing before she was abducted. But her clinical tonight already ran late. And the near-empty parking garage is putting me on edge, raising the hairs along the nape of my neck.

I scan the cement lot once more, pulling Quinn closer to my side as I quicken our pace.

“Is something wrong?” she murmurs, suddenly tense. Her feet skip along the hard ground, keeping up with me as her eyes follow mine in the same rotating sweep.

“I don’t know,” I say. “I just have a feeling.”

“Screw it. I’ll text her on the way home and reschedule.”

Quinn’s conviction is both a relief and disheartening. Because I don’t like being the reason she wants to go home. And I don’t want to scare her unnecessarily.

Then the King’s Escalade comes into sight, as does the man leaning on the hood of it.

I slow, grasping Quinn's arm and pulling her behind me as I assess the situation.

"Well, look who it is. The Mad Knight himself," the man quips, shoving off the black hood of the car to stand upright. "I heard rumors that you were dead. Looks like you just got a demotion. Probably after that stunt you pulled at the club. Babysitting the boss's sister, eh?"

"Mmm, I wouldn't mind taking care of her either," a second man says as he rounds the far bumper of the SUV. "Come on. Be honest with us, you tapping that for a little extra compensation on the side?"

I bristle, my hackles rising immediately at the lewd way they talk about her, and my brows buckle into a deadly scowl as I reach for the gun tucked beneath my jacket. Only the hospital wouldn't let me enter with a weapon. My fist clenches reflexively, my knuckles cracking as I take a moment to reassess. Just as a third man wolf whistles from behind us.

Quinn gasps, spinning to get him in her sights, and I grip her arm, holding her close so they can't separate her from me. I can feel her quivering in my grasp, and my temper skyrockets. If these bastards think they're going to lay a hand on Quinn, I'll remove each one at the wrist and shove it down their throats.

"You didn't really think Lucian Agosti makes threats idly, did you?" the first guy says, falling into step as they start to circle us.

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The garage is quiet—empty aside from four or five other cars—and the Italians seem to think that makes them safe. But it won't, not when I'm seeing red.

“Your boss ignored Lucian's last message. You remember what it is, Goliath?” he taunts.

Not that his nickname bothers me in the slightest. Because not one of these men is lucky enough to be David. And after tonight, they'll all be dead. That I can promise. Still, Lucian's message rings in my ears. If we don't want to lose Quinn for good, you'll stay out of Agosti business. Looks like their back to make good on that promise.

Only they don't know who they're messing with. And suddenly, I'm intensely grateful that Killian refused to take me off the task of protecting Quinn. Because I know without a doubt that I couldn't trust anyone else with the task.

“If you want her,” I say darkly. “You're going to have to take her from me.”

“I was hoping you might say that,” the man behind me states.

Then, as one, the three Agosti men converge on me at once.

Thankfully, I don't see a gun, and I wonder if that's because they want the challenge or if their boss warned them not to use a weapon that might accidentally take Quinn's life. It wouldn't surprise me if Lucian had darker plans than to simply kill her tonight.

Flicking a butterfly knife from his pocket, the lanky dark-haired guy I first spotted

leaning against the SUV's hood sweeps forward, coming at me with impressive speed.

Quinn gasps. "Lance," she breathes, grip tightening around my arm.

And the response tells me without looking that the guy behind me is coming at me at the same time. "Get to the car the first chance you get. Lock yourself in," I command, shoving the key fob into her pocket.

Then I crouch forward, dipping low to avoid the slashing knife. And as I grasp his wrist, I yank the cocky leader of the trio forward, launching him into the man behind me. That one's a bit burlier, with broad shoulders and an ugly scar on his lip. But no amount of battle scars are going to help him now. As his partner's knife catches him unexpectedly in the kidney.

And he drops like a rock.

"Bastardo," the second guy snarls, the one with a tattoo that says Pedro on his neck.

Whether that's his name or his lover's, I couldn't care less. He just stepped within reach. And I throat punch him hard enough to stop him in his tracks. He stumbles backward, and I take a step toward him, intending to finish the job.

Then a searing pain rips across my ribs.

I snarl, my palm clamping down on my side as I whirl. And when I spot the ringleader smirking with satisfaction, I'm ready to slap that smug look right off his face.

"Don't touch me!" Quinn screams, and my blood turns to ice when my head snaps in her direction.

Standing between her and the car is a fourth Italian—one I didn't see before—and he's coming at her far too quickly for me to intercept.

20

QUINN

I'm stunned by how quickly Lance can move. And he moves with lethal force. I've never seen anyone fight with such precision. Hell, I've never actually seen grown men fight in person before. But the speed with which Lance makes one of Lucian's men take his ally's life is shocking, to say the least.

And my ears start to ring as I watch him throat punch a second man. He's so quick, it doesn't look like a hard hit. But based on the choking sound emitting from the man's red-turning-purple face, I think Lance might have broken the guy's windpipe.

Watching Lance protect me is so much more terrifying now that our relationship has reached new heights. I'm more scared for his life than my own safety. But what can I do about it?

That's when I recall his directions. Get to the car.

Clutching the keys in my palm, I make a run for it. Because even if Natasha taught me some self-defense, I'm clearly out of my league here. I press the unlock button repeatedly, watching the headlights flash to let me know the doors are open. And still I keep on clicking as I all-out sprint toward the Escalade.

My stomach plummets as another man steps from behind a concrete pillar—directly into my path. Gasping, I skid to a stop far too close to him for comfort.

“Going somewhere?” he asks playfully, his eyebrow quirking.

And just like the man who asked if Lance was fucking me, this one gives me a slow, appreciative once-over. Eyes raking from my feet to my face, I can tell that he won't be holding back if he gets his hands on me. My stomach quivers, and I swallow convulsively as my mouth goes dry.

"Don't touch me," I warn, my heart hammering against my ribcage as I settle into the defensive stance Natasha taught me.

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He snorts, clearly unimpressed by my attempt at self-defense. And I can't say that I blame him. I'm trembling so violently, I doubt anyone would take me seriously. But I'm not about to just roll over and hand myself to the enemy.

Springing forward, the man snatches me with a grip far stronger than his lean form would suggest. And I cry out despite myself as I realize this hold is definitely going to be trickier to get out of.

But I'm not about to give up.

I repeat Natasha's steps in my head, spinning my arms so he can't get a firm grip. Then I bring my elbows down with as much force as I possess. He looks almost as surprised as I feel to realize it worked. But as much as I would like to take a moment to celebrate, there's no time for that.

While he's reaching for me again, I step into his arms and drive my knee up into his groin as hard as I can manage.

"Huuuuh!" The wind leaves him in a rush, and he pales visibly as his hips bend.

Taking advantage of the opening, I turn my shoulder to him and drive my elbow up into his nose. Then I make a break for it, jerking free of his limp grip and sprinting the rest of the way to the car.

Fingers on the handle, I'm ready to climb in when three ear-shattering gunshots echo through the enclosure. Lance doesn't have his gun on him.

Horror grips my stomach, and I think I just might vomit as I whirl to see what happened. Blood seeps through the left side of Lance's torn shirt, and he keeps his left hand pressed to the opening.

But to my intense relief, he's not riddled with bullets. He's standing over the bodies of the men he was fighting. And with a blood-chilling calm, he turns, sees the man I incapacitated, raises the gun, and pulls the trigger once more.

The shot rings through my ears like cannon fire, jarring my teeth.

And the silence that follows is deafening.

"Are you alright?" Lance asks, his voice gruff.

"I'm fine," I breathe. "But you're hurt." I stride purposefully back across the parking garage to check how bad it is. "We need to get you inside."

"No, we need to get you home," he counters, scanning the parking structure to ensure that was the last of them.

"Lance," I object, pulling the torn edges of fabric away from his skin to see the cut. It's shorter and looks shallower than the last one but will probably still need stitches. "The hospital is right there, and you're bleeding."

"Quinn." He waits until I end my assessment to look up into his eyes. "Four men are dead. I'm putting them in the trunk of the car, and I'm taking you home where you're safe. You can stitch me up there."

I swallow hard as I see his point. He just killed four men in cold blood. Of course we can't go waltzing back into the hospital—unless he's ready to face the law for his actions. And while we would have a pretty strong self-defense, I know that with

Lance's rap sheet, he won't get off that easy.

"Okay," I murmur.

He gives a curt nod and stoops to hoist the first man over his shoulders in a fireman's carry. "Get the door?"

I do, racing to the trunk of the Escalade and releasing the hatch. He has four bodies stashed there in no time, and while the ground is stained with crimson, we've left no other clear evidence behind.

Scrambling into the passenger seat as Lance starts the car, I open the glove compartment and dig through it to find some gauze.

"Here," I insist, leaning over the console to slip the absorbent fabric between his shirt and ribs. "Put pressure on that until we get home. Should I drive?"

Lance casts me a look that says I must be joking, and I fall silent. But I worry the whole way home, wondering if he might not be losing too much blood.

We pull into Killian's driveway twenty minutes later, and as I climb quickly out of the car, Lance tosses the car keys to Scott.

"I made a mess of the trunk. Mind taking the car to get it detailed?" Lance asks.

And suddenly, I'm wondering how many dead bodies Lance has brought home like this, because Scott slips into the driver's seat without questions or a second's hesitation.

"I'll stitch you up in my room," I say as we climb the steps into the house.

Lance nods, seeming perfectly at ease, though he's bled through the gauze and is now staining the crisp sky blue of his ruined shirt.

"What happened?" Natasha's stunned question comes from the stairs leading up to Killian's wing of the house.

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I glance up at my sister-in-law, catching her tight expression of genuine concern.

“Lucian sent men for me again. Lance stopped them.” I probably should explain more, but I really want to get a better look at that cut—and clean and dress it. I don’t like how long Lance has been bleeding. So I drag him upstairs to my room without further hesitation.

“Shirt off,” I command as I pull my sewing kit out of its drawer.

He does as I say, heading into the bathroom to avoid making a mess on my bedroom floor. And as I sanitize a needle, then my hands, Lance rests his hips against my counter, planting his bloody palms on the white quartz edge.

Taking a deep breath, I will my hands to stop shaking. The danger’s over, and now I have a job to do. Turning to Lance, I get to work cleaning the cut with fresh gauze soaked in antiseptic. I dab at the cut, and he doesn’t so much as flinch from the burn I know he must feel.

“Good news,” I say after a moment. “It looks like you’ll only need about fifteen stitches this time.”

“Goodie,” he jokes back, and he watches as I thread the needle and get to work.

He’s always watched this part, and I don’t understand how he can do it. It’s one thing to sew someone else’s skin up, but to watch his own get pulled back together? And to feel every time the needle goes in? His nerves must be made of steel. Most people would lose their stomach just from getting stitches without a numbing agent.

Thankfully, the familiar task of cleaning and sewing his wound helps calm my nerves, so my hands regain their steadiness as I tie the first knot closed. “Watching to make sure I’m doing it right?” I tease.

He chuckles. “I trust you. You’ve got good hands,” he says.

Heat pools in my cheeks at the compliment, and my heart warms. I chance a glance up at his handsome face as I smile. “Good hands?”

“You just got threatened and nearly abducted and they’re already steady,” he points out. “For most people, the adrenaline takes longer to fade.”

“Hmm.” I turn my eyes back to the task at hand, looping several precise sutures as I consider that. “I find this kind of task calming. I guess I don’t really have time to think about anything else when I’m focused on patching you up. And considering how often you hurt yourself, I’m starting to think I could do it in my sleep.”

“You make it sound like this was my fault,” he teases.

My eyes snap up to his dancing blue gaze. I love when Lance jokes with me. It doesn’t happen often, but it sets giddy butterflies loose in my belly.

“I guess I can’t blame you for this one,” I admit, my lips quirking as I get back to work. “I just hate seeing you hurt.” The confession comes out on a breath, and I hadn’t anticipated saying it out loud. But it’s true. Watching Lance bleed is awful. It always makes me wonder if, one day, I won’t be able to fix what’s wrong. And if that day ever comes, I’m not sure I could survive it.

“I don’t mind it,” he says, his tone light enough he must be joking, and it pulls me from my dark thoughts.

I glance up to scowl at him, letting him know I don't think he's funny. But that beautiful smile steals the air from my lungs.

"No really," he teases. "It's my best excuse for letting you touch me."

My heart flutters at the sweet statement. Because, as much as I know Lance wants me, he's never given any indication that he might have felt something for me in the past. And a tingling relief sweeps through my body at the thought.

That combined with the fact that he's going to be okay after his daring rescue tonight makes me feel almost giddy. Finishing off his last stitch, I snip the thread and straighten. "You don't need an excuse for me to touch you," I breathe, stepping closer.

And as I peer up into his deep-sea eyes, Lance cradles my face and leans in to kiss me softly.

21

LANCE

Quinn's kisses are irresistible.

They awaken a hunger in me that I've never known before. Sure, I've slept with women before. And they often seem drawn to me for some inexplicable reason. But Quinn's the first woman I can't seem to resist.

And as her soft lips mold to mine, parting at my tongue's request, I feel the deep, intense urge to bring her pleasure. I hated the way those men spoke about her. The way that they looked at her. It makes me want to wipe the memory of them from her mind and only leave me in their place.

“I have to wash my hands,” Quinn murmurs.

She’s holding them between us, palms up to avoid getting more blood on my chest. And I’m certain she would prefer I wash off as well. So I turn her to face the sink, and as she turns on the faucet, I wrap my arms around her, running my palms beneath the water that cascades from hers.

With my lips pressed close to her ear, I savor the feel of her warm back against my bare chest. The way her hips brush lightly across mine as she scrubs her palms clean—and then mine.

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God, I love everything about the way she touches me. I wonder how I ever could have been so blind. Because now that I'm paying attention, it's not hard to recognize the zinging pleasure that comes with Quinn's affection.

Her hands are strong, steady, confident, and yet always incredibly soft. Like she shows her healer's touch in the compassionate way she fixes me up. And though I know it's early and not everyone will be asleep yet, I can't seem to help myself.

I slowly start to trail kisses from the tender flesh behind her ear down the curve of her neck.

Quinn gasps, her lips parting, and I love the color that rises beneath her freckles. She looks so soft and sensual, her green eyes warm and beckoning when they meet mine in her reflection. And she tips her head, exposing her neck for me.

"That feels so good," she whispers, her eyes fluttering closed as she reaches up to comb her fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck.

I hum softly, relishing the slight saltiness on her skin—the dried sweat from her fear in the parking lot.

"I'll never let anyone hurt you," I murmur because my chest aches at the slightest reminder of what could have happened if I weren't there. And again, I'm intensely grateful for Killian insisting I be the one to watch over Quinn.

"I know," she breathes. Then she guides my still-wet palm beneath the fabric of her shirt.

Her smooth, flat stomach tightens beneath my feather-light touch, and I love the delicate shiver I elicit from her as I slowly work my way up to her lace-clad breasts. And as I palm them, her breathing hitches. Her back arches, her full, perfect ass pressing back against my quickly swelling erection.

The lingering adrenaline in my veins heightens the sensation, increasing my arousal as I get hard in seconds. And the urge to be inside her overwhelms my common sense.

“I want to feel you come all over my cock,” I growl, gripping the hem of her shirt and guiding it up over her head.

“That’s exactly the kind of overexertion that’s going to split your stitches,” she objects. “Lance, how many times do I have to tell you?—”

I silence her with a kiss, whirling her in my arms and wrapping them around her waist as I bend her back over the sink. And despite her objections, Quinn melts into my embrace.

Humming my approval, I unclasp her bra and guide the straps down her shoulders. She lets it drop to the floor, and a moment later, her delicate fingers find my pecs. Warm palms splay across my chest, and she slowly slides them up around my neck. Her soft breasts and taut nipples press against me, and my cock twitches at the scintillating feel of her skin against mine.

It doesn’t matter that the cut on my ribs is smarting. The only salve I need is what this woman can provide me. Hands roaming down to cup her perfect ass, I hoist her onto the counter. Her thighs open for me, wrapping around my hips as I step forward into my favorite place in the world.

Quinn moans as my cock digs against the seam of her jeans, stimulating her clit

beneath the fabric. And I reach between us to undo them.

“Lance,” she objects as I curl my fingers around the waist and strip the skintight fabric down her hips.

“Don’t you want this?” I rasp, aching with the need to be inside her. But if tonight was too traumatic and she doesn’t want to, I won’t force myself on her.

“Of course I do,” she murmurs. “But your stitches.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s just a scratch.”

And this time, when I kiss her, she doesn’t object again. Instead, she seems ready to throw all caution to the wind as she kisses me with fiery passion. Blindly digging into my pocket, I pull out a foil I have ready at all times these days. And I strip my pants quickly before rolling on my Magnum.

Then I hook Quinn’s knees around my elbows, pulling her hips to the edge of the sink, and I slide my swollen cock between her slick folds.

Quinn moans, the sound desperate as it vibrates from her chest into mine. And I know she feels that same intense, almost frantic need to feel that we’re alive after what happened. Sex after a fight is just about the best sex in the world. And sex with Quinn after watching her be a badass and incapacitate that guy is driving me wild.

I can’t stop thinking about the way she took him down. All cool confidence despite how intensely she was shaking. I love how fierce she is. How determined. I love everything about Quinn. And in a shocking blast of realization, it hits me that I don’t just love things about her. I’m completely in love with Quinn King.

She’s the most intoxicating, strong-willed woman I’ve ever met. And I’ve never

loved anyone so completely.

“Oh God, Lance, please don’t stop,” she whimpers, rolling her hips to grind harder against me.

Heart full, and body tingling with my newfound understanding of what this is between us, I wrap my arms more firmly around her and drive deep inside her perfect pussy. She tightens and throbs around me, gasping as she holds on for dear life.

And then she buries her lips against my throat as she cries out. Her walls clamp down around me, her clit fluttering as she finds her release. I groan, slowing at the sinful pleasure of feeling her come on my cock.

“Next time, I want you to see how beautiful you are when you come,” I purr against her ear.

Then I ease out of her.

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Hoisting her off the counter, I set Quinn lightly on her feet. And I turn her to face the mirror, bending her over the sink. Her green eyes are dark and lusty as they meet mine in the reflection. Her beautiful blond curls form a wild golden halo around her face, and her cheeks are flushed the most delicious color of red as she watches me.

Sliding my hands down her curves, I grip her full ass cheeks and spread them wide, revealing her dripping pink slit and tantalizing entrance. Then I line up with her once more and press slowly inside her from behind.

Quinn moans, her body rocking forward and her palms slapping against the counter as she braces to take my thrusts. And all the while, she watches me, her eyes devouring me with unbridled lust.

Her tits bounce with each deep penetration, and that only drives me forward harder. Because their natural full, softness is so damn sexy, it makes my balls throb.

Gasping, Quinn takes each deep, penetrating thrust like she was born to ride my cock. And her lips part softly in the sexiest O as her breaths grow ragged.

“Watch yourself as you come for me, beautiful,” I command, reaching around her hip to press my fingers to her clit.

And as I swirl them in quick, flicking circles, Quinn’s eyes snap to her own reflection. And she cries out. Her walls flutter around my cock as she finds her release, her back arches, her nipples puckering. And she’s the sexiest damn thing I think I’ve ever seen.

I love that she can see it too. Because the sight of Quinn climaxing is the single most erotic thing I've ever witnessed. And my cock aches with the need to explode deep inside her.

Still, I'm greedy, and watching her come twice isn't enough.

So as her aftershocks subside, I ease out of her once more. And I scoop her up in my arms to carry her to bed.

"Lance!" she objects, her fury dampened by the breathy sound of her arousal.

"Yes?" I ask.

"You should not be carrying me right now," she groans, rolling her eyes at me.

"Has anyone ever told you that you worry too much?" I tease.

"Has anyone told you that you don't worry nearly enough?"

I chuckle and deposit her unceremoniously on top of the sheets. Quinn squeals as she bounces. Then, before she can continue to lecture me, I fall between her thighs once more.

Our lips meet, her soft peach ones locking with mine in a fiery kiss. And her tongue darts out to tangle with mine. She might enjoy bossing me around, but I think I've found another way to occupy her sharp tongue that we can both agree upon.

I taste her deeply, relishing the way her breasts press against my chest as her breathing grows more ragged. And each time I slide into her glorious depths, she releases a soft, mewling whimper.

Her thighs quake around my hips, her back arching so she can grind her clit against me. Taking her palms in my hands, I interlace our fingers and bring them up over her head, trapping her beneath me as I take control of her desire.

And nothing else in this world matters. All I want is to make Quinn cry my name.

Because that's the most beautiful song in the world.

22

QUINN

Every time Lance touches me it's better than the last. But this time, I feel a fresh tension humming between us. An electrical current that makes my pulse pound and my stomach flutter. And when our palms meet and he pins me down against the bed, I think I might just lose my mind.

I love the way he takes control. The way he owns my body.

I honestly don't care about anything those assholes said tonight. Because, with Lance, I never have a doubt about how he makes me feel. Special. Cherished. Like I'm something precious he would do anything to protect. And at the same time, I love this fierce territorialism. I wonder if he's fucking me this passionately because of those Agosti men's taunts. Or if it's because we just had a near brush with death.

Whatever the reason, I want more.

Because this sex is so hot, I'm surprised we haven't lit the bed on fire.

And I know that I'm on the brink of coming for a third time already.

“Come with me,” I whimper, desperate to feel his satisfaction pouring deep inside me.

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And though I know I shouldn't want it—especially when we're still keeping our relationship secret—I wish I could feel Lance come without a condom between us. I want to know what it would feel like to have him fill me with his seed.

“Come,” Lance commands, thrusting deep inside me as he drives into my G-spot.

And I cry his name as I topple over the edge. Rippling around his hard length, I milk his cock. His pulsing bursts of cum fill me with warm satisfaction, and I moan lustily, my muscles relaxing as I taste the mingled euphoria in the air.

Lance slows, coming to a stop inside me. And we take a moment to breathe heavily in each other's arms. Gently, he releases my hands, taking his weight onto his forearms so he can look down at me.

“You're something else. You know that?” he rasps.

Giggling softly, I lift my head to brush my lips across his. “And you're incorrigible. But hell if I could stop you. Your ability to turn me on should be illegal.”

Lance chuckles. “That wouldn't stop me from doing it.”

He eases out of me, and though I would love nothing more than to curl up and snuggle, we both slip off the edge of the bed to get dressed.

“We might want to clean those stitches one more time before I dress them,” I state as I pull my pants up over my hips. Then I snag my bra off the floor and quickly clasp it into place.

“Whatever you say, Nurse King,” he jokes, winking at me as he buttons his pants closed.

My stomach flutters, and my cheeks warm at the flirtatious way he gives me a title.

And as I reach down to collect my shirt, loud, hammering knocks on the door make me yelp. Horror grips my chest, and I quickly scramble back into my shirt as I hear the knob turn.

“Quinn?” Killian demands, entering my room with only a moment’s warning.

“Yes—yes?” I gasp, quickly combing my hair down and praying it doesn’t look like I just had sex.

Killian stops short as he finds me and Lance in my bathroom, Lance’s ripped shirt still on the floor, his bare chest exposed. And this feels dangerously similar to the last time Killian caught him in here. Only this time, we actually were doing something he would be pissed about.

“Why was the door closed?” he demands, frowning as he looks between me and Lance.

“Oh. I...Was it? I must have closed it out of habit,” I say, struggling to keep the breathlessness out of my tone. “I needed to stitch Lance up.”

“Natasha told me you came in all bloody,” he states, dropping the line of inquisition as his gaze shifts to Lance. “What happened?”

“Agosti men,” he says curtly, and I wonder if Killian can see just how tense he looks.

“We were attacked,” I fill in, drawing the attention back to me. “My clinical ran late

tonight, and they were waiting for us in the parking garage.”

“Attacked?” Killian demands, his eyes flashing.

“I think they came to take me again,” I explain, adrenaline flooding my veins at the memory.

“They were making good on Lucian’s threat,” Lance confirms darkly, his scowl deepening.

Sighing, I turn back to my counter and open a drawer to look for a dressing square. Because now that we’re out of the fire, I know Killian will want to talk business with Lance. In the meantime, I can finish fixing him up.

“How many?” Killian asks.

“Four. They didn’t seem to realize I was watching over her. One even mentioned that they thought I was dead. I guess it makes sense since they haven’t seen much of me since I took a knife to the chest.”

Killian bristles visibly, his temper rising. “And I guess they haven’t been keeping close tabs on Quinn to notice. Maybe they thought I would back down after getting back at Lucian for taking her.”

Lance shrugs and crosses his arms over his chest. I slap them back down, frowning at him for disrupting my work, and his lips twitch with amusement as he gives me a silent apology. My core clenches from the momentary attention, my panties growing wet instantly, and I studiously turn my eyes back to the gauze as I tape to his ribcage.

“And now that we clearly aren’t backing down?” Lance presses after a moment’s silence.

“He wanted to show me what happens when I don’t do as he says. Bastard. I’m sick of his egotistical power plays.” Killian’s eyes flash, making my heart stutter uncomfortably. “I’m letting you off your leash,” he states coldly after a moment’s pause. “Find our way in. We’re finishing this.”

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“Wait, what?” I demand, my back snapping straight as I look between my brother and the man I love. “Finishing what? Find your way in where?”

My heart hammers painfully against my ribs as I get a sinking sense of foreboding. I know Killian uses Lance for the dirty, dangerous jobs he can’t do himself—and that he can’t trust to anyone else. But if the Italians have pushed my brother to the point of “unleashing” Lance, then this can’t be good. And I’m worried that Lance will put himself at unnecessary risk when he’s starting to look more like Frankenstein’s monster or Sally from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* than he is a man, what with all his stitches.

Killian’s green eyes crackle with fury as he meets my gaze. “Lance wants to search for a way to infiltrate the Agostis’ headquarters and kill Lucian.” Then he shifts his eyes back to Lance. “I tried to give Tatiana time to do it her way, but I’m done messing around. No one gets to tell me what battles I fight. And they sure as hell don’t get to threaten my sister’s safety without consequences.”

Lance nods in agreement, and my stomach drops. Because it’s happening again. The men who mean the most to me in this world are putting their lives at risk. Without a concern for how that makes me feel. And for what?

A war between the Russians and the Italians.

We have nothing to do with this.

“If this is about me, then I don’t want Lance to go. We’ll find another way,” I insist.

But Killian shakes his head. “No, Quinn. I thought maybe I’d sent a clear enough message by wiping out that bastard captain who gave the green light to hurt you like they did. But clearly not. And if Lucian doesn’t want to censure his men, then he’s not fit to lead them. Any man who wants the right to be called don should put mad dogs like that down without question. But he didn’t. Instead, he sent more men after you.”

“You should have heard the way those filthy animals talked,” Lance adds fuel to the fire, nearly growling the words as he spits them between his teeth.

And I know I’m fighting a losing battle here. Neither of them are worried about what might happen to Lance. They’re too busy being macho and trying to prove their might is bigger than Lucian Agosti’s.

“They were just trying to scare me,” I insist. “And they’re dead now. So, what does it matter? Killian, can’t you try talking to Lucian?”

“Talk?” Killian scoffs. “We’re well past the time for talking, Quinn. He’s shown complete disregard for this family. For the empire our father built. He murdered my wife’s parents, tried to claim Manhattan as his own. No, Lucian has to pay. And unfortunately, Tatiana’s men aren’t fully on board with her as their new leader—which means if we want this job done right, it’s time to take matters into our own hands.”

“I’ll go tonight,” Lance states.

His certainty strikes fresh fear into my heart because I know how reckless Lance can be with his own safety. And he and my brother are so hot-blooded—he might just throw himself into a half-baked plan that could get him killed.

But I know if I say as much in front of my brother, he’ll sense something’s off.

Because I've never spoken up so boldly to Lance in front of him before. I'll have to wait for an opportunity to speak my mind. But I can't let him leave tonight without saying my piece. If I did and Lance died, I could never forgive myself.

"Good," Killian agrees. "Is he done being stitched up?"

He looks at me pointedly, and I feel my grasp on the situation slipping through my fingers.

"Nearly. He took a bump on the head I want to check before I release him," I state in my best clinical voice.

Lance casts me a sidelong glance because we both know he didn't get hit in the head, but he doesn't argue. And my fib seems to pay out.

"Fine," my brother concedes. "Finish up. Lance, meet me in my office when you're done. We can go over your plan of action."

With a curt nod and a grunt of acknowledgement, Lance turns back to me, and Killian departs. But when he reaches the door to my bedroom, he pauses.

"I'll leave this open," he states pointedly, looking at the door then back at me.

"Thanks," I agree, knowing better than to push my luck.

And as my brother vanishes into the hall, I release the heavy breath I've been holding since he came in.

I can feel the tension rolling off Quinn in waves as the silence stretches between us. Then, after watching the door for several seconds to make sure Killian's gone, she turns back to me.

"A bump on my head, hmm?" I ask, quirking a brow.

"Please, Lance," she breathes, dropping all pretense as she steps toward me. And her fingers wrap around mine with such desperation it makes my heart twinge. "I don't want you to go. It's too risky. You're already hurt. And Lucian clearly means business. You can't do this all alone."

Sighing, I run my thumbs over Quinn's knuckles, lifting her hands to my chest and looking at their delicate perfection. "Defense doesn't seem to be working very well as a strategy either," I point out. "They were complacent when they thought we might back down. But the peace was only temporary."

“Not if?—”

“Quinn. We aren’t abandoning the Sokolovs. You know Killian better than that. You know me better than that. And it’s no longer safe to assume I’m enough to protect you. Look at me,” I insist, spreading our hands so she can look at the bandage covering my ribs, the freshly healed scar on my chest.

Quinn’s eyes drop, her chin wobbling slightly when she looks at me, and it makes my chest ache to know she’s upset. I get it that she doesn’t like me being in danger. Because it drives me insane to picture her getting hurt. But I can handle it. She wasn’t built for this world like I am.

“They got far too close to taking you this time, and that was without knowing I’m alive. Once Lucian finds out—and I’m sure he will when his men don’t come back—he’s sure to increase the men he sends to get the job done. So unless you’re willing to stay home from school indefinitely, this has to happen. Now.”

“I’ll do it,” she says as soon as I’m done.

My head jerks back at her unfaltering determination. “Do what?” I so completely didn’t expect her to say that, I’m momentarily confused by her response.

“I’ll stay home if that’s what it takes to keep you safe,” she says vehemently, her grip tightening around my hands as she peers sincerely up into my eyes.

And there’s so much genuine hope and love in her jade gaze that it rips my heart open. I’m deeply touched by her demonstration of concern—that she would put her

life on hold to protect me. It speaks volumes.

I don't know that I've ever had someone who would do that for me before.

Maybe Killian. But he and I tend to egg each other on in reckless situations. I can't picture him concerning himself with my safety any more than he worries about his own.

And as that realization hits home, I feel my love for Quinn growing, my appreciation for the woman who gives herself so openheartedly to me.

Releasing her hands, I gently cradle her sweet, beautiful, innocent face in my palms. And I peer down into her striking, color-changing eyes. "You are the most precious woman I've ever met," I murmur. "But I can't let you do that. It's important that you graduate," I insist. Then my lips curl into a soft smile. "I'll need a full nurse ready to patch me up again at some point, right?"

"That's what I'm worried about," she breathes. "What if that point is tonight? And what if I can't put you back together?"

Tears shine in her magnificent eyes, and I would give anything to take the pain away. But I can't just stand by and allow Lucian to come after Quinn again. Not when I have the power and the skills to stop it.

"I'll be careful," I promise. "I'll sneak in, find a way to take Lucian down, and be out of there before anyone's the wiser. It's not like I'm going in to take him down tonight, right? This is about reconnaissance. Getting a lay of the land so there won't be any surprises when we take Lucian down."

Quinn snuffles, the tip of her button nose turning pink with her effort not to cry. Then finally, she nods. "Okay," she agrees, the reluctance plain in her voice. "But you

better come back alive.”

Smiling, I brush a soft kiss across the adorable freckled tip of her nose. “I will.”

“And without needing stitches,” she insists, that usual undercurrent of bossiness filtering into her tone.

That makes me chuckle, and my heart swells as I pull her in for a hug. Tucking her head beneath my chin, I breathe in her subtle rose and strawberry scent and savor this moment. Because this is the one I want to lock in my memory when all the rest have faded.

My meeting with Killian took hours—just enough time for me to be slipping out of the King house around midnight. And rather than take my car or any of the familiar King vehicles, I stroll toward the busier side of Brooklyn and flag a taxi.

I give the driver an address just a few blocks away from the Agosti compound in Queens. It takes over an hour to get there from Killian’s house, but I appreciate the extra time to think through my plan. And wrap my mind around everything that’s happening in my life these days.

I’m still trying to sort out my conflicted feelings about keeping secrets from Killian. But the more time I spend with Quinn, the more confident I am that I would give anything to be with her. I only hope that doesn’t come down to losing my best friend.

Shoving that dark thought to the back of my mind, I peer out the dark window of the taxi’s cramped back seat. The Bayside neighborhood is full of massive estates that look across the Long Island Sound. Grand, picturesque, and looming, each mansion could house multiple families—just like Killian’s. But these seem far more pretentious. Well-suited to the Italian don’s style, whereas Killian’s home is chic and modern but nicely understated.

It doesn't surprise me that Lucian would own a house built for the Joneses on steroids. With his oily demeanor and perfectly tailored fine Italian suits, he looks like the poster boy for old money. And when it comes down to it, he's as old money as it gets.

I like that the Kings have built their empire with the sweat off their backs. The Agostis, on the other hand, have ties back to Sicily, with deep pockets and international power. When I really stop to think about it, I'm not surprised Lucian's held up against our troops and the Sokolovs. He has immeasurable resources at his disposal.

But tonight isn't about who has more men, more guns, or more money. Tonight's about me finding the cracks in his defenses. And everyone has them—even Lucian Agosti.

Leaving the taxi driver a generous tip as he pulls to the curb, I slip out into the dark cover of night. He pulls away, seeming perfectly unassuming about my intent as he leaves me on the sidewalk in front of a random house.

And on my soft rubber-soled boots, I tread toward the Agosti estate. Dressed in black pants and a black henley, it's easier to blend in with the dark. Still, as I near his property, I shrink closer to the shadows, crouching near the bushes so I won't be spotted.

The wall is high surrounding the property—nearly twenty feet of thick stone cemented together in a beautifully natural way. The only opening is the tall wrought iron gate at the entrance to his driveway. A key code box sits to the left for a driver to punch a number in and open the two wings that come to an elegant point at the center of the barricade.

Pausing near the entrance, I search for any way to slip inside without detection. It

looks like there might be a narrow blind spot right beneath the security cameras mounted to each stone gatepost. Now if I could just find a way to open the gate...

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I crouch and wait, watching for any guards that might pass by the gate, any sign of life beyond the blinking red dot that says the video is live.

Nothing.

Staying low, I look behind me. Maybe it would make more sense to go in through the back. But I suspect they'll have more security there. I know Killian does.

Just as I'm about to rethink my strategy, the gates groan to life, sliding into the wall itself and vanishing out of sight. With bated breath, I creep forward, staying close to the wall and hidden in shadow as the nose of a car appears. The sleek black Jaguar purrs quietly past, the black-tinted windows making it impossible to see inside. I suppose it doesn't really matter. I'm not here to kill Lucian tonight. So I let the car pass unmolested.

I do, however, take the opportunity to slip inside the property line. Using the back of the car to stay hidden, I dip around the corner of the drive and stay low to the ground as I race toward cover.

The landscaping is immaculate and open, with emerald-green grass stretching as far as the eye can see. Italian cypress trees line the drive, hinting at the fact that Lucian must pour a lot of money into his landscaping. Because there's no way in hell a tree like that could survive a New York winter without help.

I can feel the inner street urchin coming out in me, the part of my personality that detests big money like this when so many are starving on the streets. It makes that familiar itch to steal something tingle in my hands. To take from those who turn their

noses up at those less fortunate.

The Kings aren't like that. To a man, they might be rougher around the edges, closer to barflies and degenerates than they are men of honor. But at least they would give a man the shirt off their back if it would improve his day.

This kind of living just turns my stomach.

Once again, I shove those thoughts aside. Because it doesn't matter what kind of man I think Lucian Agosti is—or how I feel about his lifestyle. He probably won't live much longer anyhow. And I look forward to the day we can rip this place apart, stone by stone, just to show what happens to men who think they can lay a finger on what I find precious.

Turning my attention to the layout of the property, I take note of the silent stillness. Does he not have guards on duty?

I see men standing at the front door, but otherwise, no cameras, no perimeter watch. Glancing back at the gate, I watch it slide closed. It might be a pain to get back out unless someone happens to drive in or out again.

But that's a problem for later.

Slinking low to the ground, hiding in the shadow of the towering wall, I follow the perimeter of Lucian's estate. It stretches over what must be five acres—a massive plot of land for Queens. The compound itself is made of rich blond and brown natural stone from top to bottom, with towering archways for each door and wide terraces leading off the upper floors.

The lower entrances are all manned by guards. And as I loop around the far side of the property, I spot one sniper with a rifle looking out across the impressive view of

the Sound.

He's not paying attention, I note.

And the terrace above him has a light on. With the patio door wide open. I can tell as a brisk breeze catches the sheer blind covering the door, making the fabric billow out through the door.

My body tenses, and I glance back up at the guard. He's still daydreaming, looking out at almost a ninety-degree angle to where I would have to scale the building to get inside.

My pulse quickens as I assess the climb. It would be tricky but not impossible. I might bust some stitches—which no doubt would infuriate Quinn—but that would be a small price to pay if it meant taking a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to slip inside Lucian Agosti's home unnoticed and kill him.

But Quinn.

"You better come back alive," her words echo in my head, as does my promise that this would only be a scouting mission. And my chest tightens at the thought of deliberately doing something that would turn me into a liar. I don't want to break my word to Quinn. Ever.

Still, what if this is the only chance we ever get?

Because as lax as the guards are, Lucian's compound is near impenetrable. I'm not so sure I can even get out—let alone back in.

I could end this all tonight. Right now...

QUINN

I've completely given up pretending to be calm. And as I pace the home theater, I hardly acknowledge the movie playing from the TV. It's nearly sunrise.

And where the hell is Lance?

Killian and Natasha gave up waiting for him hours ago, my brother saying that he'll catch him in the morning. And because I don't want him to know just how desperately I'm freaking out about the man I'mnotsupposed to be in love with, I pretended like I wasn't tired yet. That I wanted to stay up and watch one more show.

But the truth is, there's no chance that I could fall sleep without knowing Lance is safely home. And I haven't spent the night without him in my bed in so long, I'd probably have nightmares even if I tried.

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So instead, I steadily wear a hole in the carpet as I let the movie play, filling my head with white noise. Because I can't stop envisioning all the things that could have gone wrong—especially since Lance is trying to do recon while he's injured.

The big, dumb idiot. I never should have let him go.

I should have tried harder to make him stay home.

What if he got captured? What if he got killed?

My heart hammers uncomfortably against my ribs, and I snatch up the remote to turn off the TV because clearly it's not helping. Then I pause. Because if I turn it off, then the house will be silent. And that would be so much worse.

My breath catches as I think I hear the whisper of a lock turning. Then muted voices.

Silencing the TV, I strain my ears to see if I'm hearing things.

No, that's definitely Donnie's brogue—which means someone's at the door.

Heart in my throat, I turn off the TV and race to the entry of the home theater. If it is Lance, he'll have to walk this way to go to his room, and I bite my lip to stay silent as I wait impatiently.

Minutes pass that feel like hours, and my stomach sinks. Was I hearing things? I could have sworn I heard Donnie.

Then my heart skips a beat as a tall, looming figure rounds the corner on soft-soled feet. Lance, dressed head to toe in dark clothing, he looks like a dark ops soldier minus the face mask and bulletproof armor. And blessedly, he looks no worse for wear.

I don't care that we're in the middle of the hallway where someone could see us. I'm so grateful he's home, I can't stop myself from running into his arms.

And as a grin spreads across his handsome face, I jump up, wrapping my legs around his waist, my arms around his shoulders. Lance grunts softly, taking a step back to absorb my inertia, and I cringe at the realization that I might have disrupted his stitches.

But my lips are already on his.

Without a moment's hesitation, he's cradling the back of my head with one hand, his other arm curling beneath my hips to hold me in place. And he kisses me back with a ferocity that steals my breath away.

I can't bring myself to pull back until my lungs are burning for oxygen. And when I finally do, it's only for a brief moment. "What...took...you...so...damn...long?" I demand between kisses.

Lance stiffens, his arm tightening around my hips, and my stomach drops as I get a cold lump of foreboding in my chest. Pulling back just enough to meet his eyes, I ask him again.

"Lance, what took you so long?"

Releasing a slow breath, he lets his eyes drop in that sign I'm coming to learn means he doesn't want to admit what he's going to say. But because I asked, he won't lie to

me.

“I went inside the house.”

“You...? I thought you said this was just recon?—”

“I know.” Slowly, Lance eases me back onto the ground, and he meets my eyes with almost painful reluctance.

“Well? Did they see you? Did you find Lucian?” What am I even talking about? Who cares? He could have died going inside that house by himself. Right now I’m furious, and as my eyes narrow into a fierce glare, I hiss, “You promised you wouldn’t do anything reckless.”

“I know, I know,” he insists, grasping my shoulders as I cross my arms defensively over my chest. “That’s why I stopped. I knew I made you a promise and that you would never forgive me if I broke it and got myself killed. So no, I didn’t find Lucian. He’s not dead. But I’m confident we can get to him.”

My heart skips a beat at the sincerity in his gaze, the fire behind his confidence. But all I care about is the fact that he stopped. Because he wanted to keep his promise to me.

That means more to me than any possible vengeance he could have gotten by killing Lucian.

It shows me that he was thinking about me. About how I would feel if he died—even in the heat of the moment. I’ve always been so terrified that I would lose Killian or Lance. And neither of them have ever seemed to give that a second thought.

But tonight, Lance did. And it brings tears to my eyes as relief floods my chest.

That means that I might not have to live through a broken heart. Even if he'll only think of his safety to satisfy me, I'll shoulder that responsibility. Because I want Lance to live a long, healthy life. With me.

“Are you...crying?” he asks, worry flitting across his face as he runs the pad of his thumb along my cheek.

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And I'm surprised to feel the wetness he brushes away. "No," I sniffle. Then I giggle as I let my arms fall to my sides. "I'm just...That means a lot to me. That you made sure you could come home safe."

Relief makes his shoulders sag, and he smiles softly. "Good. For a moment, I thought I might have blown my chances when I should have killed that Italian bastard."

That makes me laugh, and I rock onto my tiptoes as I press my palms to his broad, muscular chest. "No, you definitely did the right thing," I murmur, and I tip my chin up to kiss him once again.

He hums appreciation, his arms enfolding me, one hand cradling the back of my head as he leans into the embrace.

And because I think we've taken enough chances for one evening, I slowly step back, extricating myself from his arms. Then I grasp his hand and lead him down the hall toward our bedrooms.

His eyes light with a different kind of warmth as he follows me, and my stomach clenches giddily at the thought of rewarding him for taking such good care to protect my heart.

We only have a few more hours before the house will start to wake. And no doubt, Killian will be coming to bang down Lance's door as soon as he's done sleeping. So I want to take advantage of every moment we have left.

Guiding Lance into my room, I take one last quick glance up and down the hall

before closing my door. Then I stalk slowly toward the masculine behemoth who I want nothing more than to satisfy tonight.

“What?” he asks, his lips quirking into a smile as his eyes meet mine.

“I want to reward you for being so considerate tonight,” I say, and reaching up, I pull the tie out of my hair, letting my curls fall around my shoulders in what I hope is a seductive gesture.

Lance’s Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, and his eyes roam deliciously down my body before flicking back to my eyes. “You’re not too tired? You’ve been up all night.”

“So have you,” I point out, stopping right in front of him and hooking my fingers around his belt. “Do you just want to go to sleep?” I murmur, looking up at him through my lashes.

“Not a chance,” he growls, and his fingers tangle in my hair as he covers my lips in a scintillating kiss.

My breath catches at the unexpected enthusiasm, and my clit throbs with anticipation. But I won’t let him take control tonight—to play my body like an instrument and make me sing like a harp. This time, I’m going to be in charge. And I want to make it about his pleasure.

So I work his belt open and slowly drag it through the loops before dropping the heavy leather to the floor. Lance hums his approval, his tongue exploring my mouth as he lets me undress him. And my skin warms at the bold sense of daring that floods my veins.

Working his pants open, I reach inside the dark fabric to grasp his hard length.

Lance groans, his lips stilling, his body tensing as his cock twitches against my palm. And when I give two slow strokes, he lets his forehead fall onto my shoulder.

“Damn, woman, that feels so good.”

I give an amused hum, relishing the way he responds to my touch—just as ensnared by mine as I am by his. “I bet it will feel even better when you come on my tongue,” I whisper.

The agonized groan that leaves his lips melts my insides, and I bite my lip, suddenly intensely aroused by the fact that he would like to come in my mouth.

“You want me to come on your tongue?” he rasps, making my stomach quiver.

“And then again inside me,” I qualify seductively.

Lance clenches his teeth until the tendons in his jaw stand out against his skin. His nose flares, and his eyes ignite with dark promise that says I don’t know what I’ve just gotten myself into. But whatever it is, I’m sure I’m going to like it.

Slowly lowering onto my knees before him, I hold Lance’s gaze as I untie his boots. There’s something intensely erotic about undressing him. Of having him watch while I do it. It feels like an act of giving even though he’s perfectly capable of undressing himself.

But as he steps out of his boots, and I hook my fingers around the waist of his pants, I soak up every moment. And as I strip him of the heavy fabric, I watch him grasp the hem of his henley and pull it up over his shoulders and head.

All at once, his beautiful, muscular, tattooed body is on full display. His abs ripple and flex, his lats standing out prominently from his ribs as his arms move above his

head.

I love the intricate designs in his ink. The black swirls look almost Hawaiian in nature, but the colorful collage of animals in between have become familiar friends over the past few weeks of our intimate relationship. And every time I see them, I associate them with an ungodly, incomparable pleasure.

A slow smirk spreads across Lance's face as he catches me ogling him, and his thick cock twitches toward my mouth, vying for my attention. "See something you like?" he teases.

"Yeah," I breathe, grasping the base of his shaft and relishing the groan he makes. "All of it." Then I wrap my lips around his cock and slide it all the way into my mouth until his mushroom tip hits my throat.

"Fffuu..." Lance groans, his eyes rolling into the back of his head as he leans forward to brace one palm against the door behind me.

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Heat gushes into my core, slicking my channel.

Yes, I'm going to enjoy every moment of the reward I have planned for my Knight in shining armor.

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LANCE

The feel of Quinn's lips wrapped around my cock is out of this world. Nothing should feel this good—especially when it's so wrong. But try as I might to keep that in my mind, when I'm with Quinn, it all just seems so right.

And tonight, that realization came into brilliant color.

I always knew I would do anything for her. But that has taken on an entirely new meaning now. And I mean it more than ever. I wouldn't just die for this girl. I want to live for her. I want to know a lifetime with her.

And that's not just because she's giving me the best blowjob of my life right now.

With one hand wrapped firmly around the base of my cock, she strokes me as her head bobs forward and back. Her tongue traces tantalizing patterns along the thick vein. And with every pass between her lips, more blood pounds into my throbbing tip.

I'm tempted to tangle my fingers in her hair, to drive my hips forward and fuck her

throat. But this feels so damn good, I can't bring myself to stop her. I want her to pleasure me. Because she's doing it so perfectly, I'm close to busting my load already.

Unable to resist her cornsilk locks, I comb my fingers into her hair, brushing it back from her face. Quinn hums, her big green eyes fluttering closed, and the beautiful sight of her pleasure along with the vibration that jolts straight to my balls makes me grunt with the intensity of my arousal.

"God, you're so good with your mouth," I rasp, my hips jerking forward as her enthusiasm escalates.

Then her free hand palms my balls, rolling them together in a gentle massage. Stars explode behind my eyelids at the euphoria of her touch. Groaning, I can't help it as my hips start to rock, sliding my tip down her throat just a little bit. She tightens around it, her throat muscles constricting instinctively. But even as she gags, she continues her motion.

Taking me in and out, flicking her tongue along my length, Quinn sucks my cock like a damn angel. My fingers tighten in her hair, and she gives me another spine-tingling moan that sets my body on fire.

The muscles tighten along the base of my spine, my balls drawing up as I feel my release building. And I'm going to come in her mouth in record time—even though we had sex mere hours ago.

"Quinn, I'm gonna come," I grunt, barely forcing out my warning in time.

And as she takes me all the way down her throat once more, my balls empty in one violent burst. Lungs heaving, I breathe heavily as my cock throbs and pulses against her tongue. She chokes, the sound dangerously sexy, and when I open my eyes to

look down at her, she's watching me with tear-stained cheeks. And a look of such intense satisfaction, that I can't bring myself to feel bad.

Slowly, she withdraws from my length, sucking me clean as she goes. And with a soft pop, she releases me. Then she gives me the sexiest smile on the damn earth.

"Good?" she asks, licking her lips to ensure she swallows every last drop.

"Are you joking?" I demand, leaning down to scoop her up off the floor. And I carry her, bridal style, to the bed. "You just better not be crying because I hurt you," I growl. Then I toss her into the center of the mattress.

Quinn releases a giggling squeal that I'm growing far too addicted to, and she looks coyly up at me from beneath the arm she tossed over her head. "I didn't cry," she murmurs. "My eyes just started to water with the gag reflex."

Grasping her ankles, I run my hands slowly up her bare legs as I crawl between her thighs. "You wouldn't lie to me, would you, Quinn?"

Her beautiful green eyes soften as her smile fades. "I promise, I enjoyed that nearly as much as you did. If you don't believe me, see for yourself."

The challenge is husky, said just above a whisper, and it's so intensely inviting, I don't hesitate. Curling my fingers around the waistband of her sleep shorts, I strip them off in one fluid motion. Quinn helps, lifting her hips off the bed, first to allow me to remove them, then to shimmy her matching shirt over her head.

I love her cute sets of sleep clothes. They're not overtly sexy, but they're soft and loose and hint at the beautiful curves she hides beneath them. And when I want to take them off her, it takes all of two seconds.

I can see she wasn't lying before I even touch her, and I groan at the tantalizing way her pink slit glistens just for me. I can't wait to dive inside her. But first, I want to taste her sweet nectar. To return the favor and make her come all over my tongue.

So I hook her knees over my shoulders, and I lock eyes with her as I slowly lower my head between her thighs.

"I love it when you look at me like that," she murmurs. "Like I'm the best dessert you're ever going to eat."

"You are," I breathe across her swollen lips, then I stroke my tongue between her folds, groaning at the tangy flavor that bursts across my tastebuds.

Quinn cries out, her head falling back and her breasts arching upward as her back muscles tighten. Her nipples harden, forming tiny peaks on her soft, milky flesh. And as I run my tongue back and forth along her seam, collecting her juices on my tongue, I reach up to lightly pinch each nipple between a finger and thumb.

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She gasps, her body jolting as her fingers scramble at the sheets, and her hips buck upward, grinding her swollen clit against my lips. Taking her cue, I suck the throbbing bundle of nerves between my teeth. And I swirl my tongue around the tiny pearl.

“Oh my God, oh my God,” Quinn pants, her thighs closing on either side of my head as she quivers in my hands.

I roll her nipples, loving every second of the way she squirms. She’s so wet and aroused just from giving me head, I know she’s close to coming already. And that is insanely sexy—knowing how much she likes to please me.

It only makes me want to pleasure her more, and I wonder if I’ll ever get enough of watching her fall apart for me.

“Oh God, Lance!” she whimpers, her voice strained and soft as it climbs an octave.

Redoubling my efforts, I stroke back down the length of her folds to press my tongue inside her dripping entrance. The muscles tighten around it, urging me deeper inside her sweet depths. And God I want to put my cock inside her. Her tight hole is practically begging me for it.

Quinn’s slim, talented fingers find the top of my head, and she tugs gently at the roots, urging me back where she wants me. I smile, loving this bossy side of her tonight. I’m familiar with it in the nursing side of her life. But it makes my cock harden to have her full personality rising to the surface even in bed.

I want her to tell me exactly what she wants. And I fully intend to give it to her. And then some. Because she might know what she likes, but I also know things about a woman's body she might not learn from a textbook.

So as I wrap my lips around her clit once more, I give it a soft bite. Quinn comes alive, her body lifting up off the bed as she cries out with euphoric relief. And wet excitement gushes from her channel, coating her swollen lips and my chin all at once. Her clit throbs between my teeth, her thighs pressing against my ears. The scent of her intoxicating juices brings my cock fully to attention.

And now that I've made her come with my lips, I fully intend to fuck her brains out.

Quinn's thighs relax around me, opening willingly as I let her legs fall back to the bed, and as I rise onto my knees, I smile down at her hungrily.

"Holy..." she breathes, her words tapering off as she sinks into the bed, a puddle of satisfaction. Her lips curve into a sultry smile as her eyes meet mine. Then they travel slowly down my body, inch by inch, until she finds my cock. "If I recall correctly," she murmurs, "the deal was you'd come in my mouth and then in me."

"Hmm," I hum appreciatively. "Well, when you offer so sweetly..." Leaning in, I press a soft kiss to her mouth.

And my cock twitches as her tongue darts out to taste her arousal on my lips.

"I love it when you taste like me," she whispers.

Christ, this woman. She's going to be the end of me. "Good. Because I like burying my face between your thighs." Breaking the kiss, I lean over to open her bedside drawer, and I pull out a condom.

Quinn takes it from my hand, her fingers ripping the perforated edge before she tosses away the foil. Then she reaches between us to grasp my aching cock. And she slowly rolls the rubber down my length.

“That feels so good, I might just put you in charge of that from now on,” I warn.

“That would be unwise,” she murmurs. “Because I don’t trust myself to want to put it on.”

An agonized groan rips from deep in my chest at the suggestion of her words. “Quinn,” I growl, my voice hoarse with the intensity of my longing. That one glorious moment of fucking her without a condom was the best of my life. But we can’t take that kind of risk again. And I definitely can’t come inside her without a condom. Not until we talk to Killian.

“I know,” she says, her voice breathy with desire. “That’s why I’m leaving you in charge.” She lets out a soft chuckle. “In this one regard, I think you might be more responsible.”

The idea that I might be more responsible than Quinn in any regard makes me laugh as well, and I seal her lips with a kiss. Because she’s sheer perfection, and I just can’t resist any longer.

I roll my hips forward as she guides me home with her hand. And as I slide inside her tight, wet warmth, we both release a low, throaty moan of pleasure. She just feels so insanely good.

The newness of our intimacy might have started to fade, but the pleasure only gets better with time. And I swear, there’s no better place on earth than in Quinn’s bed, between her thighs.

Quinn reaches down to grasp my hips, urging me deeper inside her. And I comply, pressing forward until I'm buried inside her to the hilt. She rocks against me, grinding her clit against me as I start to move in and out. And our rhythm quickly builds into a passionate, erotic dance.

I don't know if it's because of my newfound feelings for her, or if today's events simply have my blood near molten. But once again, I know I'm not going to last long. And her words linger in the back of my mind, triggering the thought of what it would be like to come inside her. Raw. Nothing to stop me from filling her with my seed.

"You feel so good," Quinn whimpers, her lips brushing across the shell of my ear.

And her panting breaths send tingling euphoria racing up and down my spine. Turning my head, I press my lips against her neck. I suck gently, and my cock throbs when her walls tighten around it in response. I desperately want to mark her, to make some visible claim on her body. But I can't. Not yet.

Quinn shivers beneath me when I release the suction, running my tongue over the soft flesh to ease the pressure. And she gasps as her taut nipples brush against my chest. She's on the brink—just like I am.

Heat floods my chest to know how close she is. My balls ache as they tighten. And this time, I don't want to hold out. I want to come with her. I want to savor the intimacy of knowing we're exactly on the same page at the same moment.

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“Lance!” she moans, her fingers pressing into skin, urging me onward.

Her pussy clamps down around my hard length. And I snarl as my release hits me like a freight train.

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QUINN

Euphoria blasts through my body like a tidal wave, sending tingles out to my fingers and toes. And as I shudder beneath Lance, I feel him pulsing inside my depths, finding his release at exactly the same time.

Something about the sex tonight was different. It was hot, steamy, and sinfully pleasurable. But it also feels incredibly more intimate. I know I’m in love with Lance. I have been for a long time. But this newfound connection with him makes it overwhelmingly apparent that he’s the only man I’ll ever love. And that terrifies me. Because I don’t know that he feels the same about me.

Still, despite the hint of fear that trickles into my veins, nothing is going to dampen the bliss of this moment. The utter feeling of contentment that seeps deep into my bones. Lance stills on top of me, buried deep between my thighs. And we breathe together, our panting gasps as synchronized as our pleasure tonight.

Slowly, Lance lifts his head, his Mediterranean-blue eyes finding mine, and in their depths, I find a sincerity that melts my heart. He brings one hand up to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing across my skin with a tenderness that makes me ache.

And suddenly, I feel like all the oxygen has been sucked out of the room.

How can one man affect me so completely?

I swear, he could move the sun and the stars in the sky with the power he holds over me. And tingling waves of anticipation wash through my core as I wait for him to say something. Because I can see it in his eyes.

“I love you, Quinn,” he murmurs. “I’m in love with you. Madly. Desperately.”

My heart comes to a dead stop in my chest, and my lips part in shock. Whatever I expected Lance to say, that was not it. But the flood of emotion that wells up inside me is so overpowering, I can barely swallow past it.

“I love you too,” I whisper.

And it feels like I must be in some kind of dream because the man I’ve had a crush on my whole life just told me he’s in love with me. Not just that, he said it first—the man who hardly ever says anything. I feel like my brain might explode with that fact. Honestly, it means more to me than I ever knew it could.

How is Lance so incredibly perfect?

How does he know just how to make the world right?

I don’t know. But I do know I’m the luckiest woman in the world. Because I’m his, and he’s mine.

“We need to tell Killian. It’s time.”

A fist of anxiety tightens around my throat, but he’s right. I know he is. And I

swallow hard as I nod. “First thing in the morning?” I offer.

The tension in Lance’s brow softens, his shoulders relaxing when I didn’t even realize they were tight. And I realize this has been weighing on him a lot. Constantly maybe. And still, he let me make the call.

“Thank you.” Lance brushes a kiss across the tip of my nose. Then he rolls gently off of me and sits up.

“You have to go?” I ask, my heart sinking as he shows signs of getting dressed.

Lance pauses, his expression softening as he meets my gaze. And I know he must see the disappointment in my face.

“Sun’s almost up.” He tips his chin toward the window.

I glance behind me, surprised that it could already be sunrise. But he’s right. The first golden rays are starting to creep across the sky. Killian could be here anytime. Pulling his pants up around his hips, Lance closes them. Then he returns to my bedside and leans in to kiss my lips once more.

“Try to get a bit of sleep. I’ll see you soon,” he promises.

Then, gathering the rest of his clothes, he slips silently out the door.

I sigh, falling back against my headboard as I take a moment to wrap my head around everything that’s happened in one night. We were attacked. Lance was hurt. I stitched him up—which led to some steamy and impromptu sex. Killian almost walked in on us. Then Lance went back out to spy on the man who probably wants us all dead. And to cap it all off, I had the best sex of my life that culminated in Lance telling me he loves me for the first time. I honestly can’t believe that all happened in one night.

My head's spinning just thinking about it.

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And suddenly, I feel so exhausted, I think I might actually be able to get some good sleep, even without Lance's arms around me.

The sun is well into the sky by the time my eyes open. And to my horror, I find my mouth gaping open as I drool across my pillow. I don't think I've ever slept so hard in my life. But I also slept gloriously nightmare-free for the first time since being taken. And that alone is worth the embarrassment of having made a mess of my sheets.

Groaning, I sit up and wipe the drool from my face as I look blearily around my room. It takes a moment to get my bearings. And when I finally do, a jolt of anxiety blasts through me. I told Lance we would talk to Killian first thing this morning. And based on the clock, it's nearly ten.

Maybe Lance slept in as well?

I cringe. Doubtful. He's always been an early riser—even when he was working late nights for my father. Hopefully, he won't be too upset.

Sighing, I roll out of bed and head to the bathroom for a quick shower. Then I pull my wet hair up into a messy bun and get dressed. Lance isn't in the room where he's been staying. I checked, so I head downstairs in search of him, wondering if he's being a bad patient again and using Killian's home gym despite his new set of stitches.

"Morning!" Natasha says brightly, her hint of a Russian accent making her sound all the more welcoming.

“Morning,” I respond, offering her a smile.

“You heading to breakfast?” she asks. “I just finished my workout and shower, and I’m starved.”

That would be another likely place Lance might be, so I might as well check it out. “Yeah, sure,” I agree, traipsing down the last few stairs to join her. “Hey, thank you again for the self-defense lessons,” I say as we walk. “They came in really handy when Lucian’s men attacked us last night.”

Natasha smiles, her full red lips stretching across her beautiful face. “I’m glad to hear it. And that you’re okay. Anytime you want another lesson, I’m happy to give you one.”

“There’s more to learn?” I ask, shocked. How does she know so much about hand-to-hand combat?

“There’s always more,” she assures me. “And it never hurts to practice.”

“Maybe I can join you in the gym sometimes, then?” I suggest, my cheeks warming as I invite myself into her workout session. But it would be nice to feel more confident about defending myself. If this conflict has taught me anything, it’s that I’m not safe from my brother’s world just because I don’t take part in it. And I don’t want to be a burden—just some damsel in distress.

“Absolutely,” Natasha agrees, her responding smile warm and encouraging.

Turning down the hall leading to the kitchen, we both pause as Tatiana’s familiar voice issues from behind Killian’s office door. The thick pane of glass muffles her words, but as we share a glance, I can see a partner in crime in Natasha.

And wordlessly, we step toward the office to listen in.

“Once you get past the front gate, it’s pretty simple.”

That’s Lance’s voice, and my heart skips a beat as I realize he’s relaying what he learned in last night’s mission. Natasha and I share another look and huddle a little closer to the threshold without giving away our position by stepping in front of the glass and casting a shadow.

“They don’t have a perimeter guard,” he continues. “Just a few snipers on the roof. But at least last night, the men on duty were as good as napping. I got in and out without them taking a single shot. I get the sense that his men are all overconfident. They don’t think anyone’s going to come for him.”

“So, that’s how you get onto the property. But how did you get inside? Didn’t you say he has guards posted at the doors?” That’s Killian, and my brother’s voice sounds serious for once, dark with intensity as he focuses on the strategy of what Lance has learned.

“Only on the first floor,” Lance says. “And he’s got terraces all around. A massive one looking out over the sound.”

“So you climbed up to the balcony?” Killian clarifies.

Natasha’s lips twitch into a smirk, and from the humor in my brother’s voice, I get the sense that I’m missing something—an inside joke between them. I quirk an eyebrow at my sister-in-law, and she just shakes her head, then presses a finger to her lips, reminding me to be silent.

“The door was wide open,” Lance says. “I don’t know if it is every night, but the terrace along the back of the house is out of sight from the guards. Except the ones on

the roof. The thing to watch out for is the cameras. They're all live. I don't know if anyone's monitoring them. But I hugged the railing and wall to slip under the one by the door."

"And the cameras inside didn't catch you?" Tatiana presses, doubt tinging her tone.

The room goes silent.

"I didn't see any cameras inside," Lance says finally. "They look like they're watching the outer doors and stairs, the gates, any common entry points to the property..."

Tatiana tsks.

"We should be utilizing this information," Killian says. "Deal with Lucian with a few good men. People who can slip in and out undetected."

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“Not men. Man. I’ll do it,” Lance says.

And my heart sinks.

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LANCE

God love my foster brother for coming to the same conclusion as I did without me having to say it. The only problem now will be breaking the news to Quinn. But after last night, I know what has to happen. And it has to be me.

“Not a chance,” Killian growls. “I’m sick of sitting back and letting you two have all the fun. I’m killing the bastard who I should have killed long ago.”

I know he’s referring to the day Lucian hinted at forming an alliance against Boris Sokolov. He still feels guilty for not putting an end to the Italian’s brash idea to kill the Russianpakhan. But neither of us had believed Lucian would be crazy enough to assassinate Boris. And it was too late when we realized his boastful speech was actually the foundation to a plan he’d already hatched.

“You’re not going alone,” I state.

“No, I’m taking you with me,” Killian agrees.

Normally, I would take him up on the offer in a heartbeat. Riding into battle with Killian is one of the best feelings in the world, brothers in arms crushing our enemies

as one. But if this conflict has taught me one thing, it's that Quinn won't survive the loss of her brother. If one of us has to die, it's going to be me. I can't risk the Kings losing our boss. And he knows that—even if he doesn't want to admit it.

“One would be quieter. And I know where I'm going. If we're doing this, we need to get it done fast and get it done right. The mission has a higher chance of success if I go in alone.”

Killian's jaw works as he grinds his teeth in frustration. I know how desperately he wants to see the light leave Lucian's eyes. But I can see the resignation in the set of his shoulders even before he speaks up.

“Fine,” he growls.

“Um, no,” Tatiana interjects, crossing her arms over her ample breasts so the cleavage shows above her designer dress. “Not fine. Who put you two in charge? Last I recall, this was my fight that you agreed to help with.”

Hackles rising, I fight to keep my irritation under control because we're well past the point of this conflict belonging to the Sokolov sisters alone. Tatiana might not know it yet, but Lucian has threatened the woman I love more than once, and I won't let it happen a third time.

“Who would you suggest, then?” I demand, crossing my arms over my chest. “From where I'm sitting, you don't have a single man in your ranks that you can trust beyond a doubt. And that's what we need for this mission.”

“As it just so happens,” Tatiana hisses. “I have the perfect person for the job—my father's secret weapon.”

I haven't heard hide nor hair about the Sokolovs' secret weapon in so long, I'd started

to wonder if he went into retirement—or died alongside Boris at the charity event where Lucian Agosti and his men gunned the oldpakhdown. And I frown as I wait for a better explanation.

But Killian bristles immediately, sitting forward as he grips the arms of his chair. “Absolutely not,” he snarls, earning a surprised look from both me and Tatiana. His green eyes blaze as he glares down the Russianpakhansha, and for the first time, she actually looks a little taken aback.

Then her chin rises in a look of proud defiance. “Oh, what? You think your man is somehow superior?” she snaps back, her expression imperious.

“No, I?—”

Before Killian can give his reason, the office door swings wide, and Quinn and Natasha stalk in, their expressions stormy. It’s clear they picked up on enough of our conversation to know what’s going on. And neither looks particularly happy about our decision.

Killian tenses as his eyes meet Natasha’s, and he gives the slightest shake of his head. But whatever their silent exchange means, I can tell they’re at odds. Because she crosses her arms over her chest and strides forward to stand behind Tatiana.

“If you’re discussing who gets to kill Lucian Agosti, I’m throwing my name into the hat,” Natasha states boldly, her silver eyes daring Killian to say no.

Stunned speechless, I look between the newlyweds, trying to make sense of what the hell is going on. Natasha intends to kill Lucian herself? I know the girl is good with self-defense, and she can throw a mean knife. But she’s hardly a hardened soldier. Before the charity ball, when she killed a man to protect Killian, had she even taken a life before?

Glancing toward Quinn, I realize she must be as lost as I am. Because her green eyes are wide as they dart between the two Russian sisters and her brother. But the other three are having some kind of deadlock stare-down that tells me we've been intentionally left out of the loop. And as Killian and Natasha glare at each other, Tatiana sits back in her chair, pursing her lips in a look of smug satisfaction.

"No," Killian says flatly. He practically snarls it, and I've never seen him so angry at Natasha before.

"What is going on?" Quinn asks quietly, her voice bordering on nervous.

My instincts tell me to go to her, to shelter her in my arms. But we still haven't had a chance to talk to Killian yet. He woke me not two hours after I went back to my room and dragged me down here for this meeting.

I wait for Killian to speak up, but for once, his lips remain sealed as he holds Natasha in a steely gaze. And with a long-suffering sigh, she turns to Tatiana.

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“I trust the Kings,” she says. “Everyone in this room. Completely. It’s time to tell them.”

What the actual hell?

I watch as Tatiana searches her sister’s eyes for some deep, dark secret. Then she nods. One stiff jerk of her head granting Natasha permission.

And when Natasha turns to look at me and Quinn, her eyes are almost apologetic. “I probably should have told you both a long time ago. I’ve wanted to for...well, since before the wedding.”

I scowl, casting Killian a questioning look as I realize my foster brother has been keeping secrets from me as well. I have no room to judge. And I don’t hold it against him, but I’m curious if he’s carried the burden as heavily as I have.

“I’m the assassin my father utilized for years to maintain our hold on Manhattan without any territory wars.”

If my jaw could physically drop any lower, it would have hit the floor. And I slowly take in Killian’s petite wife with new eyes as I let that nugget of information sink in.

Beside me, Quinn releases a shocked gasp, her eyes growing impossibly wide, making her look all the more innocent. “Okay, no wonder you’re a badass,” she gushes after a pregnant moment of silence.

Tatiana laughs, her eyes shining with new affection for Quinn as she takes in

Killian's sister.

Natasha smiles as well, her chin tucking softly toward her chest in a surprising display of humility. "Thanks, Quinn," she says. Then her eyes cast to me, turning serious as they grow imploring. "I have the experience to kill Lucian, and I more than anyone, deserve the opportunity. He killed my father." The last she says almost in a whisper, and my heart twists to see the deep sense of loss in her eyes.

No child should have their parents ripped from them like she did. And I fully understand where she's coming from. But I can also sense the tension rolling off of Killian in waves. And I know without a doubt that he wants me on his side in this. Because she's the woman he loves. And as close as we are, I know he would rather I risk my life than she risk hers.

In his shoes, I know I would feel the same. And I involuntarily glance toward Quinn as I think about what it would feel like to let her walk into Lucian Agosti's house with the chance of never coming back out again. I couldn't do it. I wouldn't be strong enough.

"I've done it before. I slipped in just last night," I point out, searching for a strong enough reason that it should be me.

"But how many men have you killed quietly? Taken out without anyone noticing before you slip away?" Natasha counters.

Behind his desk, Killian sighs. He places his elbows on the glass surface and closes his eyes as he massages his temples. Because he knows the answer.

"None. But I've probably killed more men than you," I try.

"Unlikely," Tatiana quips with a smirk.

“Killian?” Natasha says gently, drawing his gaze.

And he looks a decade older as the worry settles into the lines of his face. “You can’t promise me you’ll succeed,” he says, his voice low and pained.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Killian! Lucian is not you.” Natasha hollers. “I mean, look at you! Could anybody kill you but me?”

The room goes deadly still and silent as my mind registers her words as if they’re rising to the surface of murky water. But before I can say anything, Quinn steps forward.

“I’m sorry, what? Did I just miss something, or did you just say you tried to kill my brother?” she asks, cocking her head with a level of attitude I rarely see in the youngest King sibling.

“It was one time,” Natasha says, holding her hands up.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Killian objects. “I recall besting you way more than one time, love. And as long as we’re talking about your track record counting toward your qualifications to kill Lucian, I think each one should count.”

Tatiana barks a laugh as she shakes her head, then everyone freezes as I shove out of my chair so quickly it skids backward.

“You came for Killian?” I ask, stalking slowly toward Natasha. And to her merit, she doesn’t even flinch. How did I not notice? I have this house rigged to the eyeballs with security precautions. I put our best men on shifts to ensure no one can break in because I know how many people want to kill Killian after they meet him. And yet this tiny wisp of a Russian managed to slip past all my defenses. More than once?

“Easy, big guy,” Tatiana warns, rising from her chair to pull Natasha back a step.

But the younger Sokolov sister stands her ground, tipping her chin up defiantly.

“Lance,” Killian commands, calling me off.

Not that I would ever lay a finger on Natasha. And it stings that he thinks I could. Then again, I imagine he doesn’t want totake any risks with her. The man’s so madly in love, he fell for a woman who tried to kill him. Crazy bastard.

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“You didn’t even know our father sent her?” Tatiana asks, her voice calm and reasoning.

My eyes flash in her direction, and she flinches back before squaring her shoulders to stand her ground.

“No,” I state flatly. Then I cast a long look in Killian’s direction. He and I are going to have words after this—about his apparent death wish.

“Then, that alone should prove Natasha’s the best person for the job,” Tatiana says. And her eyes cast to Killian as she lets that sink in. “Your best man—a man we can all fully respect as both a fighter and a guard—never even knew she was here. And Natasha’s right. Lucian isn’t a fighter like you. He’s a strategist. Like me. If Natasha says she can take him, she can.”

I can see the frustration and defeat plainly written across Killian’s face. But I can’t find any rational defense against her argument. When she puts it that way, I see her point. Natasha might just be the best woman for the job—even if I hate the thought of risking her life over mine.

“Fine,” Killian concedes. Then he rises from his chair to walk to Natasha. And he cradles her cheek in his palm. “But if you’re doing this, I want to take the time to put together a solid plan we can all agree on. One that will guarantee you come back alive.”

QUINN

“You’ll call me as soon as the job’s done,” Tatiana insists as we all stand in the entryway like a grand send-off.

After a week of what seemed like nonstop planning, it’s time. Tonight’s the night Natasha puts an end to this bloody conflict and rids New York of Don Lucian once and for all.

“I’ll call you as soon as it’s done,” Natasha echoes, pulling her sister into a hug.

The two girls couldn’t look more different. Tatiana is tall and all breathtaking curves and seductive beauty with dark auburn hair and worried blue eyes. Meanwhile, Natasha has a lean, petite frame that I know from our sparring session is impressively muscular beneath the skintight catsuit she’s wearing tonight. Her burgundy hair is pulled back in that simple French braid that will keep it out of her face, and her silver eyes look like hardened steel in her determination.

But as the girls embrace, I can see that same love and affection mirrored between them. And it makes my heart ache for Tatiana. She hasn’t breathed a word to suggest it, but I know she must be worried for her sister.

As soon as they step apart, Killian moves forward to say his goodbyes. And he sweeps Natasha up in a fiercely passionate kiss. The temperature of the room steadily climbs, and yet I can’t seem to tear my eyes away from the sweet and almost desperate display of love. When their lips finally separate, he cups Natasha’s face in his palms, and the tender look on his face as he gazes down at her breaks my heart.

“Do what you have to do, love,” he murmurs. “But staysafe. And hurry home. I’ll wait up for you.”

“I know,” she murmurs, her fingers curling around his, and she presses an affectionate kiss to his palm. “I’ll be home before you even know I’m gone,” she promises.

Sighing heavily, Killian wraps his arms around her, pulling her tight against his chest as he tucks her head beneath his chin. And I can tell he’s shielding her from the momentary look of agony that flickers across his face.

Tears sting the backs of my eyes to see his pain. I know from personal experience how hard it is to let someone you love walk out that door without knowing for certain that they’ll come back. You can always hope. You can trust in their strength and determination. But you can never actually know. Not in our world.

My stomach knots every time I think of the possibility that Natasha might not come home. And that familiar anxiety rises in my chest when I consider what that would mean. Because I’ve been a prisoner of the Agostis. And I don’t want Natasha to suffer that same fate. I imagine Natasha would be far stronger and more resilient than I was in that situation. But I wouldn’t wish that kind of pain on my worst enemy—least of all my sister-in-law, who I’ve come to love and respect immensely.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I force a smile onto my lips as Natasha and Killian part. And I note the way she keeps one hand in his as she turns to face me and Lance.

“Good luck,” Lance says gruffly. “Make him pay.”

Natasha gives him a determined nod—a silent reassurance that she can do this job, though she knows he wanted it to be him. And I feel a flicker of guilt rise as I realize I’m grateful to her for taking Lance’s place.

Unable to help myself, I step forward and pull her into a hug. “Good luck,” I whisper,

giving her a fierce squeeze before I release her.

And the smile Natasha unleashes on me fills me with warmth—and sadness.

“Thanks, Quinn,” she says. Then she gives Killian’s hand one last squeeze, and she slips silently out the front door into the night.

Painful stillness settles over the entry as we all stand motionless, staring at the doorway. And as the tension grows excruciating, Tatiana breaks the silence.

“I’ll head home. Call me if...Well, call me with any updates. I’ll do the same.” She doesn’t wait for a reply as she and her small contingent of guards sweep from the house.

But as she goes, I catch the glimmer of tears brimming in her eyes.

“Fuck,” Killian groans as soon as the door closes, and his fingers comb through his blond curls as he looks toward the sky.

“She’ll be okay,” I assure him, and I press my lips together to hide the way my chin trembles.

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“She better be,” he rasps. Then a growl rushes past his lips. “I need a drink.”

Stalking from the entry, he heads down the hall to the kitchen.

I cast a tentative glance in Lance’s direction, meeting his troubled gaze. Then I quickly follow my brother. I won’t make him wait up alone for his wife. I doubt I’ll be sleeping tonight either way, and as the saying goes, misery loves company.

Lance follows several steps behind me, keeping his distance, and I’m grateful. We both agreed after the decision was made to let Natasha slip into the Italians’ compound that it wouldn’t be a good time to talk to Killian about our relationship.

Killian has been incredibly stressed about his wife’s safety on this upcoming mission, so even though we’ve had plenty of opportunities to discuss it, we decided to wait until Natasha comes home.

The prolonged silence has made this week that much harder. For me, but mostly for Lance. I can see it weighing him down. But right now Killian needs us as his sister and his best friend. Not as a newly formed partnership that he’s probably going to have a cow about. So we can wait. For Killian, we have to. Because this has been one of the hardest weeks of his life, and I’m proud of my brother for having the courage to support his wife, even when he desperately wants to keep her out of harm’s way.

The sound of liquid pouring freely into a lowball glass greets me as I enter the kitchen, and Killian’s head tips back as he tosses the shot down his throat without tasting it. Then he pours himself a second.

“Care for one?” he offers, holding up the bottle as he turns to watch me and Lance enter the kitchen.

His hair is disheveled, his appearance bordering on mad now that he no longer has to hold it together for Natasha’s sake, and I think he’s closer to the brink of losing it than I’d realized before.

Stomach knotting, I attempt a bit of levity to keep the conversation light. “Thanks, but I think I’ll stick with chardonnay. One shot of whiskey, and I’ll be on the floor.”

“Suit yourself,” he says, taking the bottle and his lowball glass to the high-top bar counter and settling into a chair. Then he glares into his amber drink with an animosity that makes me wonder if he has a personal vendetta against Redbreast.

I glance at Lance again, silently passing the baton in the hopes that he might have a better way to console my brother. And I silently pad to the fridge to dig out a bottle of chilled white wine.

“The plan’s a good one,” Lance says, settling into the chair beside my brother and mirroring his pose. “She’s sneaky. And a good fighter.”

Killian nods, a hint of the tension leaving his shoulders, and I could cry with gratitude for Lance in this moment.

“You should stay sober. In case she calls.”

Again, Killian nods at the gentle redirection. “I’ll be sober again by the time she reaches the compound.”

Still, my brother gives the bottle of Irish whiskey one last violent glare before sliding it across the counter away from him. It clinks gently against the kitchen wall, coming

to a stop without toppling. And I'm mildly impressed by my brother's skill.

Sipping on my glass of wine, I pad toward them, choosing a spot on the kitchen counter and hoisting myself onto it. Then I cross my legs so I can form the third leg of our triangle. "So, as long as we have the time to spare...I say you give us the dirty details on exactly how Natasha tried to kill you."

Relief floods my veins as one corner of my brother's mouth quirks into a crooked smile. And when he looks up at me, I see the flicker of humor chasing away his haunted look. "You sure you want all the dirty details, Quinn? I may or may not have blackmailed her into having sex with me that first night."

I gasp, exaggerating the horror on my face to encourage a laugh from my brother. Though I am slightly appalled and most definitely mortified to think Killian would do such a thing. But considering how crazy in love with Natasha I know my brother is—not to mention the fact that they got married—my curiosity outweighs my sense of responsibility as a feminist who ought to have her fellow sister's back.

"Okay, maybe skip those dirty details, but now I have to know the story."

As I scoot forward to demonstrate my brother has a riveted audience, I'm just glad I've found a topic that might take my brother's mind off his agonizing worry for a moment.

The drama of my brother's romantic pursuit of Natasha could probably fill a book. And I'm shocked to find that when the last details of his story come to a close, I've been listening for over three hours—as has Lance.

Lance has proven a far more stoic listener. But I start to worry when Killian's tale draws toward its inevitable end. Because I can sense the ugly finish before it comes. And with Killian's recounting of the charity ball—the night Natasha's father died,

and Killian nearly did also—I can see that same tortured look return to his eyes.

“I never realized you and Natasha went through so many...ups and downs,” I say gently as he falls silent. “She always seemed crazy about you, from the moment I met her.”

Killian’s lips twist into a bitter smile, and he gives a soft chuckle. “It just took a knife to the gut and nearly bleeding out for her to realize it.”

“Well, maybe if you hadn’t been such an ass at the start...” I point out, quirking an eyebrow.

“Maybe...” he agrees. Then his eyes flick toward the clock above the kitchen sink.

It’s nearly 5 a.m. And my stomach sinks as I realize Natasha’s been gone too long. A dark sense of foreboding settles around me as silence fills the kitchen. And I know Killian’s thinking it too.

Something went wrong.

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My brother glares down at his empty lowball glass as if it personally offended him. Then he rises from his stool to pace the kitchen.

I nearly jump out of my skin when his phone vibrates across the kitchen counter a moment later. And I don't get a chance to look at who's calling before he snatches it up.

"Yes?" he demands—definitely not the way he would answer if it were Natasha. Then he heaves a breath, his free hand rising to knead his brow. "No, I haven't either. She's not back yet."

It must be Tatiana calling to check in. And from the sounds of it, she hasn't heard from Natasha. Biting my lip, I fight back the tears that threaten and glance toward Lance for reassurance.

His deep-blue eyes are dark with concern, his brow pressed together in a fierce scowl. And he shakes his head. He's got nothing—no clue how to make this situation better.

"Maybe I should go—" Killian starts, but he stops abruptly, and I can hear the vague tenor of Tatiana's voice as she cuts him off. "Well, then, what do you suggest? If she's in trouble, we can't just sit here and do nothing!"

I tense, my heart breaking into a sprint at the word trouble. Does Tatiana know something?

"Fine. I'll wait until sunrise. But after that, I'm going after her. You can help or not."

Killian hangs up, and from the way he white-knuckles the phone I can tell he desperately wants to throw it. Instead, he slams it down on the counter with unnecessary force. And I cringe as I hope it can take the abuse.

Sighing heavily, he slumps back into his chair and scrubs his face with his hands.

“Tatiana hasn’t heard from her either, then?” I venture, gently trying to prod information from him.

“No, and she’s confident Natasha would call by now if she were able. Which means something definitely went wrong. But we have no way of knowing what.” He lets his hands fall from his face, and his eyes are suddenly bloodshot with pent-up emotion. “I should have insisted you go with her,” he says, looking at Lance.

“Maybe,” Lance agrees curtly, his expression carefully guarded.

And my heart twists because I know how much he wanted to go—how willingly he would put himself in harm’s way to help.

“But Tatiana doesn’t think you should go after her now?” I prod again, trying to redirect my brother into a more productive line of thought.

“No. She thinks if Natasha is trapped inside and hiding, we don’t want to expose her by jumping the gun.”

I nod. It makes sense.

“She’s right. Of course. The worst thing I could do is accidentally reveal her presence. But I just can’t stop thinking what if he found her? What if he overpowered her like I could? I’ve underestimated Lucian before, and I’ll never forgive myself if I do it again.” Killian’s fingers comb into his hair once more, and he tugs it like a

tormented soul looking for relief through punishment.

“It’s not your fault, Killian,” I whisper.

“What does it matter whose fault it is if I lose her?” he demands.

And the tortured look he gives me now sends a shiver through my bones.

29

LANCE

Between Quinn and I, we’ve done our best to talk Killian off the ledge, but I can see him breaking down. Mentally, he’s holding on by a thread, and it rattles my foundations to see my foster brother—a man with unparalleled willpower and unshakable strength of nerve—so close to shattering.

He stopped talking nearly an hour ago, preferring to sit in sullen silence as he contemplates all the horrors his wife might be enduring at this very moment. And while I sit up with him, steadfast in my vigil, I’m glad we moved to the living room. Because Quinn was starting to look like she was asleep on her feet.

Now, she’s curled up on the small sofa, her head resting on the arm of the chair, where it fell off her knuckles when her body finally succumbed to sleep against her will.

I shift stiffly as I cast her a surreptitious glance, and Killian seems to stir from his reverie. His eyes land on Quinn, and for the first time since Tatiana called, I see his expression soften ever so slightly.

“I should carry her to bed,” he murmurs. “She’ll wake up with a sore neck if she

sleeps like that.”

“I’ll take her,” I offer. “You should be ready and available for Natasha when she gets home.”

It’s an empty hope, and we both know it, but it’s all I can do to avoid the crushing devastation of the alternative. Killian nods, settling back onto the couch and clasping his fingers as he returns to his comatose state.

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Gently, I ease my arms beneath Quinn's slight weight and hoist her up off the couch. Her head lolls slightly, and she stirs before her cheek comes to rest on my shoulder. Then she seems to settle back into her dreamless sleep.

Thank God for small miracles, she doesn't seem to be having any nightmares—despite recent events. And I hope that will stay true when I take her to bed. But Killian's right. We can't leave her to sleep in that chair. She'll be all sorts of bent out of shape—literally.

Climbing the stairs toward her wing of the house, I wonder if it's wise to leave Killian alone. He looks like a man unhinged. But I think he's holding it together so he can be ready to help Natasha as soon as he knows what she needs. So I'm trusting my foster brother while I take care of the woman I love.

I ease the door open to her room and slip inside to lay her gently across the sheets. Heading to her wardrobe, I pull out a throw blanket and lay it across her. Then I take a moment to look at her, to really take in her beautiful face.

When she's soundly asleep like this, she looks so peaceful. So innocent and young. Her cute button nose and smattering of freckles will always give her a more youthful appearance, and while she's mentioned more than once that she hates being mistaken for someone under twenty-one, it's just another thing I love about her.

And as I watch her sleep, I feel myself falling in love with her all the more.

I don't know how Killian's doing it. I hurt for him as he sits in a prolonged state of agony, thinking about what's happening to Natasha. I can't imagine how I would feel

if Quinn went missing for so many hours and I knew she was behind enemy lines. As terrible as it was to have her dropped off at the front gates that night—battered and bruised and half-terrified out of her mind—I could almost consider it a small blessing that we didn't know what had happened to her until she'd been returned.

And I know how selfish it is to be grateful that she's safe in her bed. But I feel it all the same. Bending over her, I smooth her mess of curls back from her face, and I press a soft kiss to her forehead.

Then I creep carefully back out of her room and close the door.

I can hear Killian's voice before I make it down the stairs, and I pick up my pace as I realize he's on the phone. His tone is strained, his voice raised, and as I enter the living room, I find him pacing in aggravation.

"I told you we should have gone for her," he snarls. "We should have been there hours ago."

He pauses for a response, and I assume it must be Tatiana, judging by his words. She's the only one he's spoken to since Natasha left.

"Fine. Fine. Yes, I'll see you soon." Killian wrenches the phone from his ear and jabs the button to end his call.

Standing in the doorway to the living room, I watch, waiting for him to tell me what's going on.

"Tatiana's on her way," he growls, casting a dark look in my direction as he continues to pace.

I nod. I'd gathered as much, considering he didn't immediately order me to get the

car.

“Lucian just called her. Arrogant bastard. He says he caught Natasha trying to kill him and now he’s holding her prisoner.”

Icy slivers trickle into my veins, turning my blood to viscous sludge. I clench my fists as that incessant thought runs through my brain once again.

I should have insisted I do this job.

I never should have conceded. But my feelings for Quinn got in the way. Because I knew how much she would hate it if I went. So I let myself be talked out of it. I should have stood my ground. Then I would be the one in Lucian’s hands. Not Natasha. That would have been far less painful than it is to sit here, feeling helpless.

“What does he want?” I ask. If he’s holding her prisoner—and calling Tatiana—he must have demands.

Killian turns to me with a tortured look, and for the first time, I see a hint of true madness behind his eyes. “It sounds like he was more than delighted to uncover the true identity of the Sokolovs’ assassin. He thinks that’s enough to get Tatiana to cooperate.” Clenching his teeth, Killian takes a moment to collect himself before finishing. “He fully intends to reveal Natasha’s identity to all of New York unless Tatiana gives up her throne by the end of the day.”

A lead weight settles in my stomach as I realize how terribly our plan fell apart. And the repercussions are so far beyond my imagination, I’m terrified to try wrapping my head around them.

The infamous Sokolov assassin has countless enemies in New York. The number of dangerous families who have promised their weight in gold to anyone who can find

the assassin are nearing a hundred. Not to mention all the people who would hunt her down themselves for the pure satisfaction of exacting vengeance for a loved one.

If Lucian reveals Natasha's identity, he won't have to touch a hair on her head. He can just sit back and watch as all the families she's ruined come out of the woodwork for their pound of flesh.

My stomach turns at the thought of what could happen to Natasha if Tatiana doesn't hand Manhattan over to Lucian. And I'm not sure if things will end much better if she does.

"What are we going to do?" I ask. He just has to say the word, and I'll do it. I might not be a brilliant strategist or a master manipulator like Tatiana and Killian, but I know how to fight for the people I love, and I'll crush Lucian for what he's done.

Killian looks on the brink of throwing up, and I get the sinking feeling that, for once, he doesn't have an answer. "We're going to get her back," he states finally, his tone brittle enough to shatter. "Even if I have to kill every last Agosti man with my bare hands, I will get her back."

I nod as I struggle under the immense guilt threatening to crush me.

How many people will die because of this?

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How bloody will this fight get?

It should have been me.

If it had been, this never would have happened. Because I wouldn't have let Lucian take me alive. Either he would be dead now, or I would be just another sad sap lost in battle. I would have seen to it that he would have no choice but to kill me. He wouldn't have spared me for negotiations anyhow.

Natasha, on the other hand, is an invaluable bargaining chip.

And we just let her waltz right into his hands.

I should have thought of that. Because I know Killian.

And there's not a doubt in my mind that he will rip this world apart to save Natasha. The same goes for Tatiana. And that leaves us all at Lucian's mercy because he holds all the cards.

Our only chance of surviving this is if we can crush him completely. And in the meantime, I can only hope we can get to Natasha in time.

30

QUINN

Heart breaking into a sprint, I jolt awake at the shrill voice that carries to my ears.

And for a moment, I don't know where I am as I bolt upright to look around. I must have fallen asleep and someone carried me to my room. I feel bad for having dozed off when I know how worried Killian is about Natasha.

But the raised cadence of a woman's voice chases away that guilt as I recognize who it is. My heart stutters to a halt. Because I can think of only one reason why Tatiana Sokolov would be here, talking like that right now.

Flinging the blanket off me, I scramble to my feet and race downstairs.

"We are going to make that Italian bastard pay for taking my sister," she thunders, her body quivering in her rage as she and Killian face off.

Only my brother doesn't look like he's ready to argue. He looks like he's ready to fight. "I have all my forces on their way here right now. I suggest you call your men in as well. I don't care if it brings the entire NYPD down on our heads. I'm ready to make whatever display of force is necessary to get her out. But the priority is Natasha's safety. After we can guarantee that, I intend to raze Lucian Agosti's empire to the ground."

"Agreed," Tatiana says, her phone already in her hand.

And all the while, I stand frozen in the doorway, my hand raised to cover my mouth in horror. Lucian must be holding Natasha prisoner. How Killian and Tatiana found out, I don't know. But that hardly matters right now.

My mind is working a mile a minute as I listen to my brother strategize with Lance on the best way to break through Lucian's defenses based on what Lance knows of the compound.

Tatiana speaks in Russian to someone over the phone, her voice authoritative and

concise in whatever directive she's giving. And as soon as she hangs up, she reengages with my brother.

"My men are on their way," she says. "We can gather and coordinate here. This is as close as we'll get before crossing into Lucian's territory."

Killian gives a curt nod. "How many armored cars do you have? Lance said the front gate is going to be Lucian's weak point. If we can ram through it, we may be able to flood the estate before he has a chance to organize a defense."

"As many as we need," Tatiana says. "I have thirty on their way right now. But I wonder if Lucian has his eyes on this place. If so, he'll know we're coming. That could jeopardize Natasha."

Killian nods, his brows pressing together in deep thought.

"Send your men straight into Queens," Lance suggests. "Tell them to pick a spot within five minutes of the compound and hold tight. We can coordinate with our men, give them the plan, then have one of our cars meet up with each of yours."

"I like it," Tatiana agrees. And she's back on the phone a moment later.

I've never seen my brother and the Sokolovpakhanshawork so well together as they amass their forces and form a strategyto crush the Italians and rescue Natasha. And I'm amazed by Killian's ability to collaborate and coordinate when it really matters. For months, I've watched him and Tatiana butt heads. But today, when Natasha's life is on the line, he's another man completely.

"We still have the problem of gathering the men here if Lucian is watching," Killian says to Lance.

“It might be dangerous to communicate over the phone as well,” he points out.

“Send them on circuitous routes,” Tatiana suggests, covering the mouthpiece of her phone with one hand.

Killian shakes his head. “I don’t want to waste the time if it isn’t absolutely necessary. Every minute we leave her in Lucian’s hands, he could be hurting her.”

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My stomach knots painfully as my skin lights on fire with the memory of what Natasha could be enduring. I start to tremble as I realize that my worst fears are coming to life right here. Right now. Everyone I love will be going to war for Natasha—and they might not all come home. But if they don't help her, she might never come home. And I know without a doubt that losing her would destroy my brother. So all I can do is wait and pray that they all come back to me safely.

Tatiana quickly wraps up her phone call and returns her attention to the conversation at hand. And while my mind is reeling, she seems to be tracking each thread of this convoluted knot without batting an eyelash.

“He won't hurt her,” she says calmly, confidently.

“You don't know that,” Killian growls, and I can see how close he is to losing it. He's always been a live wire, ready to snap at a moment's notice. Usually, that comes out in his mischievousness. But today, I can see it's what's going to obliterate him if he can't reel his emotions back in.

“I do,” Tatiana says softly, grasping Killian's forearm. “Because he knows how much we care for her. And he knows that if he does hurt her, we will stop at nothing to crush him. Lucian is hoping that he can make a deal, and by returning her safely to us, that means we will uphold our end of the bargain as well.”

My brother swallows convulsively, his gaze dropping to the floor as he shakes his head. “I've underestimated Lucian for the last time,” he rasps. “I failed to protect your father. I failed to protect your sister. I won't make the same mistake again.”

Heart shattering, I bite back a sob as I stand by, watching Killian's world fall apart. And all I am is a spectator. Because these aren't physical wounds I can stitch up with a needle and thread.

"We've both made mistakes, Killian," Tatiana says. "We've both underestimated him. But in this one regard, I know I'm right. If he's going to hurt Natasha, he's going to make sure the guilt lands squarely on my shoulders. He wants me to know that I have the power to save her, so if she dies, her blood will be on my hands. Not his."

I'm impressed by both Tatiana's logic and the level of compassion in her delivery. And while the world seems like it's quickly unraveling, I'm amazed at just how well Tatiana thrives in this role. This is why she should lead her father's men. Because while my brother is losing his ever-loving mind over the woman he married, Tatiana is somehow keeping a cool head.

"Call your men. Have them stagger their arrivals. Give the message to half of them. They can pass it along to the other half before going to meet up with my men. It won't take more than a few hours for everyone to learn the plan." Tatiana glances down at her delicate gold watch. "It's almost eight now. Even with that delay, we should be able to have everyone in place before noon. And that will put us at Lucian's front door a full six hours before his deadline."

Taking what seems like the first deep breath in hours, Killian nods and gets to work. Tatiana gets on the phone once more as well.

And suddenly, I find myself standing across the room from Lance—all alone with him and yet unable to run into his arms to seek comfort. Cruel tears blur my vision at the thought of losing him.

Because he and I both know that in a fight this size, not everyone will make it out

alive.

God, I hate this so much. It feels like no matter which direction I turn, I'm going to lose someone I care about. And there's nothing I can do about it. Just sit here and wait with a needle and thread, hoping I can fix whatever broken pieces return to me.

Soft warmth radiates from Lance's deep-sea eyes, and he tips his head subtly, signaling for me to follow him so we can meet in secret before he goes.

31

LANCE

I don't know when Quinn woke up or how much she heard, but from the fear shimmering in her eyes, I know she heard enough. And it breaks my heart to see her look so hopeless.

I know it's risky to speak to her now.

The last thing Killian needs is to walk in on us behaving like a couple.

But I can't leave this house without knowing she's going to be okay.

I need one more kiss, one more moment to breathe her in so I can take her with me in my heart. And as soon as she steps inside the library doors, I pull her into my arms.

She gasps, her hands grasping my biceps as I seal our lips with a passionate kiss. And she melts into me, her arms slowly snaking around my neck so she can kiss me back. I love the sweet taste of her lips, the hint of salt on her tongue from the tears she must be holding back, and my heart swells to bursting as I savor the feeling of holding Quinn close.

Her tongue is just as adamant, her kiss just as desperate as she clings to me. And though I know she's trying to hold it together, I can feel she's trembling.

"Talk to me, Quinn," I murmur, finally breaking our kiss because I can't handle the silence any longer.

"I don't want you to go," she breathes, and a slow tear escapes her eye with the confession. "I know that's selfish and that Killian needs you and if you don't go, he's less likely to come home. But that doesn't make it any easier. I just hate it. I hate it all—the fighting, the danger, the thought that you or Killian or Natasha might not come home. I don't want anyone to die, and I don't understand why this is even happening."

"Sweet, kind, loving, good girl," I breathe, stroking a tear from her cheek in a futile attempt to soothe her. "You shouldn't have to understand. But this is the brutality of the world Killian and I live in. Lucian isn't some special breed of monster brought from the darkest pits of hell. He's just another power-hungry prick who's willing to watch others suffer in his claim for more power."

Quinn shakes her head, the tears coming faster. "You and Killian aren't like Lucian," she insists. "You might exist in the same world. But you're good men. And he's pure evil."

God, I love Quinn for believing I'm that kind of hero. But I'm not. I've hurt plenty of people. I've killed countless men to help raise the King family to a higher power.

"Good is a matter of perspective. I try to be good for the people I care about. I will always try to be good to you. But this is why Killian and your father wanted a better life for you. Because you're capable of so much more than what our world has to offer. You are good, Quinn King. And I don't want this world to drag you down with it any more than they do."

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With every beat of my heart, I mean that. I've never met anyone as kind and compassionate and smart and driven as Quinn. She's everything I would hope to be if I weren't the broken shell of a human being this world has made me. And I wish I could tell her that. But I don't know how when the familiarknot of silence rises in my throat, threatening to choke the life from me.

Quinn sniffles and brusquely brushes at the tears sliding down her cheeks. "It would have been nice to have a normal life, the kind of life you and Killian and Daddy envisioned for me. But it's too late now," she says with a bitter smile.

And God, it breaks my heart to hear her say that. But it's not too late. It's never too late. And if she wants a normal life. I will do everything within my power to give that to her—even if it means I have to let her go. "If you don't want this life, Quinn, I would never force you into it," I promise her.

I rasp around the knot in my throat that swells with each agonizing word. But I force them out all the same. Because I never want Quinn to feel trapped—not with me, and definitely not in my world. "You could leave, go live with one of your other brothers—Jamie, Finn, or Henry. They all have normal jobs, normal families, normal lives. You could get a normal job in some hospital across the country. And I swear, I'll let you be. Because all I want is for you to be happy."

Quinn's jade eyes brim with fresh tears, and she looks so utterly miserable, I think she might actually be working up the courage to break up with me. But as her tears spill over once more, she releases a watery laugh. "I didn't mean it's too late because I thought you would force me to stay with you," she chastises. "It's too late because I love you so desperately, I couldn't possibly be happy with a normal life if it meant

having one without you.”

Her tears flow fast and hard now, but I can’t seem to stop the heady relief from blasting through me and nearly bringing me to my knees.

Cradling the back of her head, I bring my lips crashing down on Quinn’s once more as I kiss her passionately—desperately. Because I’ve never been so grateful in my life. I honestly don’t know what I would do if Quinn ever chose to quit me. I can’t even remember a time before her that I could go back to. She’s like the sunshine that lights the sky. If she left, I would be a cold, lifeless desert, nothing but an empty husk of a man.

And I pour all of that into my kiss as I hold her like the world is ending.

We’re gasping for air by the time I finally relinquish her lips. Still, I hold her close as our staggered breaths come crashing together in the space between us. “As selfish as it might be, I can’t begin to express how relieved I am to hear you say that,” I growl.

Quinn laughs, the sound soft and warm and inviting. “I think you just did,” she says playfully. And she runs her delicate, talented fingers along my temple, combing stray locks from my eyes.

“I love you,” I murmur, pressing my forehead to hers as I close my eyes.

“I love you too, Lance Knight.”

“I have to go,” I say after a poignant moment of silence.

“I know,” she whispers, and yet her arms tighten around my shoulders. “Just...promise me you’ll come home safely—and you’ll bring Killian and Natasha home alive too.”

“I promise,” I murmur, breathing deep to soak up every last ounce of her I can before I go.

Then I press my lips to hers for one last chaste kiss. And with agonizing deliberation, I release Quinn to rejoin Killian before he comes looking for us.

32

LANCE

I’m honestly shocked and a little amazed by just how well Tatiana’s plan came together. Not that I doubted her strategy—only that we managed to coordinate hundreds of men from two completely different cultures, two completely different worlds of organized crime, and we united them into a terrifying force in just a few short hours.

For months, we’ve been trying to do just that. And now, in the final hour, when the life of the Sokolov princess is on the line, it finally happens. The stakes couldn’t be higher.

But my heart hammers with a fresh sense of purpose and determination when I see the troops falling into formation around us. Together, we create a terrifying battering ram and caravan of death as we head down the quiet neighborhood streets of Bayside.

Lucian Agosti’s wrought iron gates come into view once more.

Only this time, we don’t intend to slip inside unnoticed. We plan on crashing right through the Italian don’s front doors.

“Everyone, brace for impact. We don’t know how many cars it might take to bring those things down.” I scowl at the tempered metal barrier that I suspect is more

formidable than it looks.

And while we're the third SUV in a long line ready to swarm the gates, I have a feeling it's going to take more than one to achieve entry.

The first pair of armored vehicles hit the barrier with a grating shriek of metal on metal. The earth itself seems to tremble, the rock pillars holding the gate in place shake. And crumbs of debris tumble from the twenty-foot-high facade that surrounds Lucian's compound.

A second set of vehicles drives straight into the bumpers of the first two, and the gate protests loudly, the hinges popping and snapping as the powerful engines rev at full force.

Then it's our turn, and I put pedal to the metal at the last second, launching the Escalade forward as I plow into the one before us.

"Hoo-eeh!" one of Tatiana's men calls like a battle cry.

And with one last ear-piercing shriek, the left-side gate—our side—folds at the joint before snapping free from the wall completely. Our Escalade jumps forward, suddenly free of its obstacle. The first two SUVs before us barrel down the gravel drive, rocks pinging off the cars around them as they race toward the front door of Lucian's compound.

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More cars flood in behind us, and I can't tell if they broke through the right side of the gate as well or if these are the ones from the left side, filling in the gaps. And I'm not sure it matters as we fill the circular end of Lucian's drive within moments.

I bring our Escalade skidding to a stop. Behind me, Tatiana gives a soft grunt as the abrupt halt makes her snap forward against her seat belt. And I glance over my shoulder at Killian.

He gives me a curt nod, and I open the driver's side door, accepting the machine gun Tatiana's man hands me as I stand on the lip of the car door. Pointing the gun toward the sky, I unleash a quick burst of bullets. A sure sign to get Lucian's attention. And the signal for the rest of our men to open their doors and arm themselves, fixing their weapons on the front door of the house.

I wait several beats, imagining it might take the don a few seconds to wrap his mind around our sudden presence—the force that we brought with us. And while I wait, I slowly scan the open expanse of Lucian's property in the daylight.

Slowly, my stomach sinks.

Because it takes me mere seconds to realize we're not the only ones out here. Tucked back along the property line, on the far side of the house, I spot the glint of countless sniper rifle sights. Then a good number more catch my eye along the roofline.

And while we have the protection of our cars—and certainly the numbers—the men currently aiming guns at us are on home turf. And they have already claimed the high ground.

My chest tightens as the front door opens, and more armed gunmen come flooding out, covering every last inch of the front terrace along with the space behind the decorative bushes beneath the ground-floor windows.

Last, but not least, Lucian comes out, his lips spread in a cool grin, dressed to the nines even now, as he holds a gun to Natasha's head. Her hands are bound in front of her, and she looks on the brink of murder as she struggles against Lucian with each step.

Still, he drags her forward, gripping her hair a little more tightly every time she tries to resist.

"Bravo," Lucian says emphatically from the top step of his terrace. "You know, after the sideshow act the two of you have been putting on these past few months, I'm really quite impressed. You pulled out all the stops to get your sister back, didn't you, Miss Sokolov?" he chides. "Or was this all you, Mr. King? Because it would seem you have more skin in the game than I originally realized. After all, I hear you've taken the former Miss Natasha Sokolov to be your wife since her father died. Isn't that right?" He tsks, as if disappointed in Killian. "And after you gave me such a hard time about the terms of my alliance. It would seem everything's worked out quite nicely for you. Thanks to me."

He's trying to rile Killian up, get him to do something rash, I realize. And my stomach drops at the sound of Killian's voice carrying across the courtyard. He's rising to Lucian's bait.

"You're dead, Agosti," he growls. "If you've hurt a single hair on her head..."

"There's no need for threats," Lucian says. "You can have Natasha back in one piece as soon as I get what I want. And I've already told Tatiana what that is."

“Don’t make this any uglier than it’s already become, Lucian,” Tatiana says calmly. “Give me my sister, and we’ll walk out of here, no questions asked. No one has to die.”

Lucian’s lips curl into a cold smile, his hazel eyes glinting. “We’ll see about that. Unless you’ve had enough time to consider my offer. Would you rather give me your father’s empire in exchange for her life?”

In the silence that follows, I glance back over my shoulder, and I’m surprised to find a flicker of indecision in Tatiana’s eyes. She’s actually weighing it as an option.

“Don’t do it, Ti!” Natasha shouts defiantly. “I’ll never forgive you if you do. I would rather die than see the Sokolov empire in this slimy git’s hands.”

A stirring in the Russian forces raises the hair on the back of my neck. They like Natasha’s spunk. And I can feel them preparing to fight. Guns click and shift in men’s grasps behind me.

Still, Tatiana looks torn.

What the hell is she waiting for?

We didn’t bring all our forces together to back down now. Perhaps she’s worried Lucian won’t keep Natasha alive if violence breaks out. But I doubt he would kill her. She makes the perfect shield.

“It seems like I might need to give up Natasha’s little secret after all if I want to motivate you,” Lucian goads, attempting to provoke her.

And I see the way Tatiana’s porcelain skin pales. “This is your last chance, Lucian. Give me Natasha, safe and unharmed, and I’ll let you live.”

Lucian's smile spreads slowly across his face. "No deal. You see, I think you've grown too big for your britches. And if you don't want to settle this peacefully, then let me cut you down to size."

"Open fire!" Tatiana commands her men.

Bullets ping in every direction—up to the rooftop, out to the property lines, along the front of the house. Everywhere but within ten feet of where Lucian holds Natasha hostage. She flinches, ducking down to make herself as small as possible.

And while it seems the Sokolov men are being careful not to hit Natasha, their bloodlust drives them to obey Tatiana's order without question. The Kings join in on Killian's command, and I take my gun in hand, lining up my sights before I open fire on the rooftop snipers.

We're not the only ones however.

As soon as Tatiana gives her men the word, Lucian's reinforcements follow suit, firing back at the squad of armored cars. And while the vehicles offer a considerable amount of cover, it quickly becomes apparent that we're surrounded on all sides.

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While we were busy trying to negotiate, Lucian was ringing us in. And now, we're sitting ducks. In one ugly, horrifying moment, it becomes clear that the Italians could actually win this fight.

33

LANCE

The raucous barrage of bullets hitting metal, rock, and cement makes my ears ring, and I grind my teeth as more than one missile comes dangerously close to my body. My odds of being hit are getting higher by the minute as Sokolov and King men drop, narrowing the Agosti men's range of targets.

And while I mow down half a dozen snipers on the roof in less than a minute, they quickly learn to duck for cover—as do the men hiding just out of range along the perimeter of the compound.

“We're losing too many men!” Tatiana calls.

“We can hold a bit longer!” Killian bellows back.

But even Lucian is retreating back into the safety of his home, dragging Natasha with him as the cross-firing bullets come dangerously close to hitting them. Releasing a string of cusses, I take my chances, aiming carefully at Lucian's Italian leather dress shoes to stop him from taking her out of sight.

The target's too small, though, and he keeps jostling Natasha, making her stumble

backward and into my line of fire. Cussing, I redirect my aim, mowing down several of the guards to the right of the front door.

That stalls Lucian as he flinches sideways, instinctively avoiding the onslaught.

“He’s taking her!” I call a warning.

“Cease fire! Duck for cover!” Tatiana yells.

And as one, Sokolov and King men all obey her order.

I do as well, slipping back into the front seat of the Escalade, and I stare at the pockmarked windshield of the once pristine car. There will be no explaining that to a cop if we get pulled over. Not without a fat stack of cash to smooth the story over.

Panting in the back seat, Tatiana and Killian share a look that I catch in the rearview mirror.

“He was waiting for us,” Tatiana observes, stating the elephant in the room.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if this was his plan from the start. Damn it! He knows us too well.” Killian punches the ceiling of the car, releasing his frustration on the inanimate object.

“He’s had his sights set on my father’s empire for a long time,” Tatiana breathes, letting her head fall back against the headrest. He won’t stop until he’s crushed us.

“Or you hand it over to him,” Killian agrees grimly.

Tension crackles in the air, and I wonder just what Tatiana might be thinking. Her sharp blue eyes are inscrutable as she looks out the shattered windshield toward the

entrance of Lucian's home. Deep in the shadows, I can just make out two figures—most likely the Italian don with his hostage.

"I don't know that Natasha will let me," she murmurs. "I'm worried she's going to force his hand if I can't break her out of there."

"Don't say that," Killian growls.

Silence stretches between them, and I glance back at the formidable pair of leaders once more. We're the only three left alive in this car, and I can feel Killian's desperation humming in the air. How Lucian brought us to this point, I don't understand. I'd like to consider us a force to be reckoned with. But it feels like Lucian's using us as child's play right now.

"He's coming back out," I state flatly, watching as the Italian don steers Natasha back onto the front terrace.

From reading her lips, I'm pretty sure she just called him an impressively vulgar expletive. Then again, I suppose she could be speaking in Russian. From the look on her face, I would wager it's the former.

Tatiana sighs. "Let me handle him," she says. Then her piercing blue eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. "If this all goes horribly south, I'm going to agree to his terms and hand over my power. If that happens, I need you to do something for me."

"Anything," I say.

"Shoot my sister."

"What?" Killian and I echo each other's disbelief in perfect stereo.

“You better have good aim, Knight. And you better shoot her somewhere that won’t kill or permanently injure her. But it’s the only way to ensure she doesn’t do anything stupid.”

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I turn to look Killian in the eye. Then I shift my gaze to meet Tatiana's fully. "I'll do anything but that."

A line of machine-gun bullets drum up the nose of our armored car, punching fresh spiderwebs in the windshield, and I know that means our time is up.

"We don't have time for this," Tatiana snaps. "If you want to keep my sister alive, just do as I said. It'll be a last resort!" Then she throws her door open once more and slowly steps out of the car.

"Are you ready to negotiate yet?" Lucian asks, his lips curling into that arrogant smirk as I take my position, preparing to aim without drawing suspicion.

"Just get it over with and kill me already," Natasha snaps from where she stands, firmly within his grasp. "I'm getting bored with your stupid mind games, and I won't let my sister hand over the empire my family has worked so hard to build. Not to you. Not ever."

"Natasha, shut up," Tatiana says, her voice cold, calculating, detached. But I see the way her hands tremble before she clasps them behind her back.

That draws a laugh from Lucian, and he cocks his head to the side—as if entertaining a notion he only just considered. "You know, I've been thinking during that nice little respite. And I suppose I could be willing to compromise...for the right price. After all, the Sokolov empire won't do me much good if you and all your men are dead, now would it, Miss Sokolov?"

“I suppose not,” she says dryly.

“Well then, I’ll make you a deal—the same one I made your father, actually, before this whole feud started.”

Tatiana tenses visibly, and Natasha jerks against Lucian’s hold—as if his mention of her father personally offends her. Considering Lucian is the one responsible for his death, it wouldn’t surprise me if that’s exactly what her reaction means.

Pulling Natasha’s head slowly, almost gently, back until his lips are near her ear, Lucian says just loud enough for us to hear, “Keep that up, and your husband’s not going to have anything to hold onto tonight when you’re in bed.”

Killian growls, stepping away from the car, as if ready to come at Lucian and turn this into a proper bar brawl. But he freezes when the don’s eyes catch his movement.

“Ah-ah-ah,” the Italian don chides, cocking the gun against Natasha’s temple. “Alright. No more interruptions, lovebirds,” he taunts. “It’s time to let the grown-ups talk. So, Tatiana—you don’t mind if I call you Tatiana do you?”

“You can call me whatever the hell you want so long as you get that gun out of my sister’s face,” she grits through her teeth, her body vibrating visibly with fury.

“Hmm,” Lucian hums playfully. “Funny you should say it like that, because what I would love most to call you right about now is wife.”

Tatiana gasps, as if struck by a physical blow.

Natasha pales, her eyes growing wide, and for the first time, she completely stops fighting.

My blood runs cold as the air in the courtyard turns deathly still and silent. It's so quiet, I could hear a pin drop, and I shift my grip on my gun as I sense our last resort looming on the horizon. There's no way she'll agree to marry the sick bastard. Not after everything he's done to their family.

"So, what do you say, Tatiana?" Lucian prods. "Marry me. Today. And before you say a hasty no, just think of it. We could form a lasting alliance between our two great families. Any sons you bear me will rule over both our territories when they come of age. Hell, I'll even agree to leave you in charge of the Sokolov men for as long as you desire. The rest of our lives if that's what you want."

"You...don't want to rule my territory yourself?" she asks, her voice halting with the pain of even considering his offer.

"Well, of course I do. But that's why it's called a compromise. Now, that's a pretty generous offer—if I do say so myself. But know," he adds, cutting off Tatiana's words before she can make her choice. "This marriage will be a contractual alliance, one you will be agreeing to in front of all your men and mine—and the Kings, for that matter. So, I would recommend you take a moment to seriously consider it before you give your answer."

Another pregnant pause settles over the battlefield. My finger itches toward the trigger as I search for any opening to kill Lucian before Tatiana speaks. But I can't find one. Natasha's too exposed, too vulnerable. And I worry that even if I do manage to clip Lucian, he could accidentally pull the trigger on his gun and kill her.

I can't risk it.

"If you won't accept my conditions," Don Lucian continues when Tatiana's prolonged silence seems to wear on his patience, "just remember, I do fully intend to hand the lovely Mrs. King here over to the families she's wronged over the years. Who

knows, maybe I'll set up an auction and give her to the highest bidder. I bet she'd go for an impressive price. And then I'll let you watch as they tear her apart. And you and I will both know that you could have done something to stop it—if only you could have set aside your pride and looked at what's best for your people.”

“I'll do it,” Tatiana states, the answer jumping from her lips almost before he's finished speaking. “I'll marry you.”

Vocal objections rise from the Sokolov men around us, and I glance back to find a good number of them frowning in disapproval. They shift uneasily, uncertain of what to make out of theirpakhansha's sudden shift in tactics.

But from the looks of it, no one is more upset by this turn of events than Natasha.

“Today?” Lucian presses.

“Today,” Tatiana agrees.

“Ti, no,” Natasha pleads tearfully, trying to take a step forward.

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And from the pain in her voice, I can tell that her concern is no longer for the well-being of their family's name or the former glory of her father's empire. She's imploring as a concerned sister that Tatiana not to marry Lucian. She's begging Tatiana as a girl who loves the person she grew up with and doesn't want to see her be miserable.

Because no one deserves the kind of hell on earth Tatiana will experience if she traps herself in a marriage alliance to Lucian Agosti.

But the deal is done. I can see it written plainly in the determination of Tatiana's face. And so can Lucian. He reels Natasha back in once more, a greedy smile spreading across his face.

"Done," the don says, bringing a ringing sense of finality to the negotiations. "Why don't you come untie your sister, then? And you and I can head to the church together?"

My body hums like a live wire, every fiber of my being straining to find some way out of this conundrum. But I don't know what it would be. And once Tatiana falls into Lucian's possession I don't see how we'll ever get her back.

Chin held high, the Russian princess stalks coolly up the gravel drive to climb the terrace steps.

"Ti, please," Natasha whispers as her sister draws near. "Go back. It's not too late. Nothing is worth that sacrifice."

With a soft smile, Tatiana stops in front of her sister. And completely ignoring Lucian, who looms darkly at Natasha's elbow, the elder Sokolov sister reaches for the bindings around Natasha's wrists.

"You are," Tatiana says, her voice kind and brimming with a love I've never heard before. "And so are all the men Father entrusted to my care. If this is what it takes to keep you all safe, then this is what I'll do."

Natasha's restraints fall to the ground, and she throws her arms around her sister's shoulders. Pulling her close, she bites back a sob as she hugs Tatiana ferociously.

Behind Natasha, a strange flicker of emotion passes over Lucian's face. It's so fleeting, I'm almost positive I imagined it. But if I had to name the odd emotion, I would almost say it was akin to regret.

And he lets the sisters take a moment to truly say their goodbyes.

Then Tatiana cups her sister's chin in her soft, beautifully manicured fingers. And she holds herself regally as she says, "Go to your husband, sister."

"I love you," Natasha murmurs so quietly I can only read it on her lips. Squaring her shoulders, she presses her mouth into a determined line, and she does as Tatiana said.

Her feet pick up their pace as she races down the steps, and as if he can't wait to see her safe, my foster brother rushes forward to meet her.

"Killian," Tatiana says, turning to stand beside Lucian, who looks like the cat who ate the canary. "You be good to her."

Killian gives her one solemn nod, and I get the horrible sinking feeling that, rather than a wedding, Tatiana's being ushered to her own funeral.

“Muzhchiny, idite domoy,” thepakhanshacommands.

And as one, the Sokolov men gather their dead in their vehicles and slowly form a procession as they depart. Slipping into our Escalade, we follow along with the rest of the King men. The peace that follows feels like a tentative one, but it seems that the war between our three families has ended as quickly as it began.

34

QUINN

I’m too wound up to do anything productive—like homework or study for the NCLEX. Instead, I sit on the stairs in the entryway, my knee bouncing as I fixate on the front door. I want to be ready to attend to whatever wounds need treatment. But it feels like a lifetime of anxiety as I wait for the survivors to return.

Finally, I can hear the rumbling engine of our Escalade. It sounds in need of medical attention itself, and I race toward the door, wrenching it open because I can’t wait any longer.

I gasp at the sight of the armored SUV. Dents pockmark every inch of it—including the windshield, which looks more like crackle glass than a solid pane. Only two other cars return with ours, and my heart hammers against my ribs.

This can’t be all the survivors...Can it?

I think I’m going to be sick.

But I have to know.

Is Killian alive?

Is Lance?

I scarcely dare to breathe as the engine shuts off. I can't tell who's driving the car.
And again, it feels like ages before two doors swing open.

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I sob as Lance steps out of the driver's seat, Killian and Natasha sliding out of the back.

"I brought one home for your medical attention," Killian says, keeping his arm wrapped firmly around Natasha's shoulders.

She looks as pale as a ghost, her expression somber, her eyes haunted, but I don't see any visible wounds. That's when Killian tips his head over his right shoulder, indicating one of the cars behind them.

Two King men help a third out of the back seat, and the man hobbles forward on one good leg. The other appears to have a bullet wedged in his thigh.

"Take him to my infirmary," I state.

Then I fall into step with my brother, though I ache with the need to collapse gratefully into Lance's arms. But that will have to wait until we have a moment alone.

"Is this it?" I whisper, picking up on the grim faces of the men who have come home.

"No, we had to scatter to avoid mass arrests," Killian says.

Relief surges through my veins, followed by another icy dose of fear. And I take Natasha in with fresh eyes, then Killian, then Lance as I note a distinct absence from the people who left here this morning. "Where's Tatiana?"

“She traded places with me so Lucian would let me go,” Natasha says, her voice hollow.

“Lucian said he would end the war and allow Tatiana to keep her territory as well. If she married him.”

Killian’s expression is near tortured, and I can only imagine how horrible he must feel over what’s happened. Now that I know the whole picture, I can see the guilt weighing down his shoulders, the sense of responsibility for how terribly things have gone wrong—even if it’s not his fault.

“Poor Tatiana,” I breathe.

And silent tears start streaming down Natasha’s cheeks.

“I’m taking Natasha to our room,” Killian says, and he pats my shoulder. “We’ll talk later.”

I nod, heart heavy as I turn toward the infirmary. And Lance follows. His steps carry him beside me, and his hand twitches, as if he wants to reach out and take mine. But he doesn’t. Instead, we walk in silence.

The men already have Christopher up on the table when I walk in, and he’s reclining back, his teeth clenched as he stares up at the ceiling.

“What happened here?” I ask, going through my usual checklist of questions, though it’s easy to ascertain the basics.

“Ricochet, I think,” he grits out.

“Let’s take a look.” Pressing the back of my hand to his forehead, I check for any

preliminary signs of fever. So far, so good. I don't think he's even gone into shock.

I cut open the thigh of his pants, ignoring his grunt of protest as I peel the fabric back.

"Good news. It's right in the meat of your muscle," I state, sticking to layman's terms. "And it didn't go deep."

I scrub my hands clean before snapping on a pair of latex gloves. Then I bring a tray of surgical tools closer and fill a syringe with some local anesthetic. It takes all of twenty minutes to extract the bullet and five stitches later, he's as good as new—well, almost.

"Thanks, Doc," Christopher says as he hobbles toward the door.

And though I won't be a doctor even after I graduate, I let the nickname slide. It doesn't matter how many times I tell Killian's men, they keep calling me Doc. "You're welcome," I say, my lips twitching into a smile.

"See you in the morning, Lance," he adds.

Lance gives a jerk of his chin in acknowledgment. Christopher and his companions are out the door, leaving us mercifully alone.

I turn to Lance, releasing my first breath of relief as I inspect him more closely. Blessedly, he looks perfectly fine—aside from the stitches he already sustained from protecting me in the parking garage.

"Are you alright?" I ask, crossing the room quickly to throw my arms around him.

And it feels so incredibly good to feel how warm and strong and alive he is as he wraps me in his big, muscular arms.

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“I’m fine,” he promises, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

He smells strongly of gunpowder and smoke along with the coppery hint of sweat—the intensely masculine scent I always associate with him. And I breathe him in, my heart pounding hard and steady as I listen to the healthy rhythm of his.

“Thank you for keeping your promise,” I murmur, tipping my chin up to meet his eyes.

“I’ll never break a promise to you if I can help it,” he assures me, combing a stray lock behind my ear.

Then he leans in to claim my lips, his mouth softly covering mine in a passionate kiss.

We stay like that for a long moment, wrapped in each other’s arms. And I feel bad for feeling so happy right now, in the midst of all this turmoil. But I’ve never been more grateful for the blessings in my life. And Lance is by far one of the best.

“I smell like battle,” he murmurs, wrinkling his nose.

“Is that what you call it?” I tease, lightly running my nose along his. “I don’t mind it so much. But I’d be more than happy to help clean you up.”

His groan of desire releases a smoldering heat in my belly, and suddenly, I can’t wait to take a shower.

“Come on,” I breathe, stepping back and taking his hand to guide him toward my room.

Once we’re safely behind closed doors, I help Lance strip his layers of clothes one by one. And while I’d like to savor just how beautiful he is, I also take the time to give him a thorough once-over. I know he said he was alright, but after everything that’s happened, I need to take the extra measure to put my mind at ease.

Finally satisfied that Lance is, in fact, all in one piece, I release him from my care as a nurse. And as he leans into the shower to turn the water on, I quickly strip my clothes to join him. I let him stand beneath the warmth taking a loofah and soap so I can help him scrub the day’s grime from his body.

And as I massage the suds over his rippling muscles, I take the time to enjoy every inch of him. Lance’s fingers pause in his hair, the shampoo running down his temples as his eyes sink closed. And I’d like to think he’s enjoying the attention as much as I enjoy giving it.

When he’s thoroughly scrubbed and rinsed, Lance pulls me into his arms, ushering me beneath the warm water. And as it sprays softly down on us, he leans down to kiss me tenderly. Today, there’s no rough desperation in his kiss. It’s all tender passion. And I wonder if that’s because he’s as grateful to have me safe in his arms as I am his.

Our tongues tangle in a slow, sensual dance, our breaths mingling as I slowly run my hands over his broad chest and muscular shoulders. His calloused fingers brush down my spine, raising tingling goose bumps despite the warmth of the water.

And the heat that blossomed for him in my infirmary comes swelling back to life in full force.

“Make love to me,” I murmur, my stomach quivering with the intimacy of those words.

“Always,” he rumbles, his hands sliding down my curves to grasp my thighs.

And he hoists me effortlessly up around his hips as he steps toward the shower wall.

The cool tile against my bare skin makes me gasp, and my nipples harden from the immediate chill. Then Lance’s chest is pressing against mine, his steady warmth seeping into my skin and chasing away the cold.

“I don’t have a condom,” he rasps.

“I don’t care.” I want him inside me so desperately, we can think about protection later. It’s worth the risk. Because life’s too short to pass up moments like this.

With an agonized groan, Lance concedes, guiding his swollen tip to my entrance.

I can feel how wet and ready I am for him already. And as he eases one silken inch inside of me, I nearly come undone with the sinful pleasure of having no barrier between us.

“Oh my God,” I moan, quivering with the need for him to fill me.

And as he presses into my aching core, it feels like I’ve died and gone to heaven.

“You feel so. Damn. Good,” he groans against my lips, and he kisses me with renewed zeal, his tongue stroking deep between my lips.

I whimper, clinging to him as I enjoy the ride. His thick length slides slowly in and out of me, taking his time so I can enjoy every glorious inch. And somehow, this

feels even more erotic than when he's pounding inside of me, possessing my body with his masculine strength.

This is so sweet and emotional, it's sensual beyond reason. And it sets my skin on fire. The soft droplets of water that drum down on us feel like gentle rain. And I imagine this is what it feels like to be in one of those romantic movies—where the hero and heroine reunite after years apart, only to get caught up in a storm.

Pleasure zings like crackling electricity up and down my spine. And every time Lance presses deep inside me, my hips find the shower wall with a dull thump. The sound of it is intensely erotic. And my pussy throbs, tightening around him as I climb rapidly toward my release.

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All the while, the tingling bliss of feeling him raw inside me builds my anticipation. And a deep, instinctual thrill makes my stomach quiver. I can tell he feels the same as his muscles bunch and jump beneath my palms, straining to maintain control of himself when he could so easily come inside me.

And the desire to beg him to is almost irresistible.

I want to feel his hot cum filling me up.

I want to know what it feels like to have him possess me in every way imaginable.

I want to take all of him inside of me and carry his seed.

“Damn it, Quinn, you can’t talk like that,” he groans, shuddering against me as his hips jerk forward, his cock burying inside me to the hilt.

Belatedly, I realize I must have been saying my thoughts out loud, and I gasp. I must be near delirious I’m so sleep-deprived. And I bite my lip as I realize Lance is clinging on to the shreds of his self-restraint.

“Sorry,” I whisper against his neck. But I’m not entirely. Because I want him to know just how badly I need him, just how deeply I crave all he has to give.

“Don’t be sorry,” he murmurs, curling his fingers into the hair at my nape and tipping my head to meet his eyes. “I just don’t want you to say something you’ll regret after the heat of the moment.”

“I won’t regret it,” I promise. “I want all of you, Lance. Forever. If you want me.”

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LANCE

I’m speechless. My heart’s pounding against my ribs so furiously, I think it might explode. And I’m starting to wonder if I’m not trapped in some kind of erotic dream. If I am, I never want to wake up, because the words coming out of Quinn’s mouth are so incredibly romantic, they could make my heart break.

I don’t know what I did to deserve this woman. But I would serve ten life sentences in the darkest pits of hell if that’s what it took to have one lifetime with her. And when she’s looking at me with those big green eyes, I can’t imagine refusing her anything she wants.

Selfishly, I also feel an intense need to come inside her.

To mark her in a way no man ever will again.

I want to pour my seed into her glorious depths and tie us together with an unbreakable bond.

So if Quinn says that’s what she wants, too, I’m done waiting. It doesn’t matter when Killian finds out. Because I’m going to marry this woman. As soon as she’ll allow it.

Kissing her fiercely, I make my decision. Then I reach around her to turn off the shower, and I cradle her against my chest as I carry her into the bedroom.

“Lance, what are you doing?” she giggles, goose bumps erupting across her bare, glistening flesh.

“I’m going to come inside of you as many times as you want,” I growl, my cock throbbing and my balls tightening as I put my thoughts to words.

Quinn gasps, pulling back from me just enough to really read my expression. “You’re serious?”

“As the clap.”

“Don’t make STD jokes while you’re still buried inside me,” she scolds, but I know she thinks I’m funny by the way her lips twitch with the effort to keep a straight face.

“As you wish,” I murmur, falling onto the bed with her.

And Quinn releases a lusty groan as my cock presses deep inside her.

“You’re sure this is what you want?” I check one last time.

“Yes,” she breathes, her green eyes dilating until they’re practically black.

Heat radiates through my core, as I cage her slight frame between my arms and start to rock into her depths once more. Quinn gasps, her fingers pressing into the muscles of my back as she urges me deeper. And I oblige, rolling my hips so I grind against her clit with each penetrating thrust.

She feels sinfully good as her wet heat ripples around me, tightening every time I find her G-spot with my throbbing tip. And when I claim her lips, she kisses me with a desire that sends tingling sensations racing down my spine.

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Her soft, full breasts bounce, her hard nipples brushing across my pecs, and my abs flex as that familiar sense of tension starts to build at the base of my spine.

I've never come inside a woman without protection before. And the thought of doing so with Quinn is agonizingly exciting. My cock's so swollen with arousal, I can feel every detail of her perfect hole, and she takes me so perfectly inside her, she's like the keyhole to my lock.

"God, I love you, Quinn," I growl.

I think I've said that more in the past few days than I have in the entirety of my life. And yet it still doesn't feel like I've said it enough. Because my heart is filled to overflowing, my body so full of passion for this woman I think I might cease to exist if she weren't here with me.

"I love you too, Lance," she whimpers, her thighs trembling as she wobbles dangerously along the edge of climax.

"Come with me, beautiful," I command, sliding in and out of her again and again, setting each of my nerve endings on fire.

"I'm coming," she gasps against my lips.

And a moment later, I feel her clench around me. Her walls tighten begging me to stay inside her as I release my load. Fireworks explode behind my eyelids as that tension at the base of my spine snaps. And I thrust deep into her depths as I flood her glorious channel.

Quinn's pussy ripples around my length, urging every last drop from me. And I release burst after burst of hot cum inside her, filling her up and mingling with her own release until it's dripping out around my base.

We pant together, the oxygen ripping in and out of my lungs as I revel in what is easily the best sex of my life. And I stay buried deep inside of Quinn, urging my cum deeper into her depths as I slowly rock on top of her.

"That," she gasps. "Was. Amazing."

I hum deep in my throat, leaning in to press a kiss to the curve of her neck. She shivers beneath me, her fingers pressing into my skin as she silently responds with enthusiasm. A lingering aftershock throbs down my length, making my cock twitch despite the fact that my balls are completely empty.

And only after our breathing has returned to normal do I ease gently out of Quinn. Then I collapse onto the bed beside her.

Sighing contentedly, Quinn rolls toward me, snuggling close to my side as she rests her cheek on my shoulder, her leg across my thighs. With one arm around her back, the other grasping her hip, I hold her close.

This is a happiness I never knew I was missing out on. But now that I have it, I want to hold onto it with all that I have. And as a deep contentment seeps into my bones, I feel a heavy exhaustion settle over me like a blanket.

I don't recall the last time I slept. I think it was days ago. And I make a mental note that I need to wake up early to slip back into my room in the morning. Because there isn't a chance in hell I'm going to leave Quinn alone tonight.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Killian's livid tone jolts me from my sleep, and as my eyes snap open, Quinn's room comes starkly into focus. As does the sunlight filtering in through the window, confirming that I slept well past the time I should have snuck out.

And my traitorous cock twitches as Quinn's silky skin slides across mine as she groggily sits up, blinking her heavy eyelids. Then she gasps, gathering the sheets around her naked body as her spine goes rigid.

"Killian," she says, dread lacing her tone as reality hits her moments after it hits me.

"What the hell are you doing in my sister's bed?" he snarls, keeping his eyes well-trained and away from Quinn as he glares at me.

And I know from the deadly look in his gaze that I am well and thoroughly screwed.

"Killian, please, I can explain," Quinn says, attempting to intercept her brother's line of sight.

"No need," he growls, stooping to pick up my pants from yesterday and flinging them in my face. "Get dressed. I want you to leave and never come back."

"Killian!" Quinn objects.

But I know better than to argue. He's so furious right now. And I don't blame him. This is the worst possible way—and time—he could have found out. I can't believe I was so reckless, and my chest tightens as I realize what a grave mistake I've made. I didn't just screw things up with my best friend. I made it so he'll try to root me out of Quinn's life as well.

"I trusted you," he says blackly, his expression murderous as I come to a stand before him. "I asked you to protect one of the women who matters most to me in the world,

and you went ahead and fucked her while I was too busy and weighed down to notice. How long has this been going on?"

Lifting my hands slowly, palms out, I show him I don't want to fight, and I swallow the knot in my throat before I try to answer him. From the corner of my eye, I see Quinn shaking her head, silently telling me not to answer the question. But I can't do that. I've already destroyed my relationship of trust. If I have a prayer of salvaging my friendship with Killian, I need to be honest.

"About a month," I rasp.

"Are you serious!" Killian bellows, reaching behind his back and drawing the gun tucked into his belt. "If you don't leave right now, I'll put a bullet between your eyes without hesitation," he states, his voice suddenly calm and flat—deadly.

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“Killian, no, please,” Quinn begs, scrambling to put her body between us. “Be reasonable. This is Lance, for Christ’s sake. He’s your best friend!”

He reaches out to snatch her wrist that’s not holding the sheets up around her body, and he yanks her out from between us, dragging her away from me. I bristle instinctively at his unnecessary roughness. I know he’s mad, but he has no right to touch Quinn like that, and my hackles rise as I scowl.

“You got something to say?” Killian asks, aiming the gun more pointedly at my head.

Quinn looks around his shoulder, tears streaming down her cheeks, her eyes wide with fear, and I would give anything to fix that. But I don’t know how I’m supposed to do so without hurting Killian. And that would hurt Quinn too.

“Please, Lance. Just...just go,” she whispers, her voice quavering as her chin trembles. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Like hell you will,” he growls. “You’re never leaving this house again. And you, traitor,” he snarls, herding me toward the door with his gun. “If you ever set foot on this property again, I’ll kill you. You hear me?”

How did my world get so completely flipped on its head in a matter of seconds?

I back toward the door, following Quinn’s wishes, but every bone in my body screams for me to stay. To work this out.

I just don’t know how. And I won’t be able to fix anything if I’m dead. I’ve never

believed Killian would shoot me before. I never dreamed anything could drive a wedge between us. I've been by his side since the day his parents picked me up off the street. And yet, I'm the one who obliterated our friendship.

I knew he would be pissed about Quinn.

I knew I should have said something.

But it never felt like the right time.

And now it's too late.

Heart in my feet, I turn and leave. My boots feel like lead weights, each step heavier than the last. And guilt gnaws me from the inside at just how poorly I handled that. Because now I haven't just lost my best friend, my brother in everything but blood.

I might never see the woman I love again.

And it's entirely my fault.

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QUINN

"How could you do that?" I scream, wailing on my brother's shoulder in my pain and fury. "He's your best friend, you idiot. He's been nothing but good and loyal to this family. I'm in love with him, and you just chased him out of our home like he's some wild animal!"

"As far as I'm concerned, he is," Killian growls, rounding on me now that he's certain Lance is gone. "And of course you're in love with him. You've been pining

over him since the day you realized you like men. He took advantage of that while you were scared and hurt and vulnerable. He looked me in the eye for weeks, pretending to be my friend while he was fucking you behind my back, and he never said a word.”

“Because I told him not to! Lance wanted to tell you from the start, but I knew you’d overreact, and what with the whole Italian conflict and me being kidnapped and then all this with Natasha?—”

“Don’t you dare make excuses for him,” he snarls, getting right in my face as he points a finger at me.

“Killian, please. Won’t you just listen to me? Lance and I are in love. He loves me. And I get that it could be hard to wrap your mind around when you’ve been friends for so long?—”

“We weren’t friends. We were brothers. And if he were ever truly my friend, he never would have touched you.” Killian towers over me, his rage expanding his size until I feel like I’m craning my neck to look up at him.

But if I won’t stand up to him, who will? I’m his sister, and as such, it’s my responsibility to tell him when he’s being a complete dolt. Like he is right now.

“Of course he’s your friend. He’s the best friend a moron like you could ever hope to have. And he’s felt horrible about it, but that doesn’t give you the right to an opinion about who he or I fall in love with.”

I know I’m being harsh, especially with the weight Killian’s carrying on his shoulders right now. No doubt he’s stressed about Natasha—who’s clearly devastated about her sister’s fate and probably beside herself with guilt. But if I can’t talk some sense into him, then I’m terrified I might lose Lance. Forever. And I feel like I only just found

the happiness I've craved all my life.

"I do get to have an opinion about it when he's fucking my baby sister under my roof. He's over a decade older than you for Christ's sake!"

"I'm twenty-three years old, Killian! I think I can decide for myself who has a right to fuck me, as you so crassly put it. And if you want to be this unreasonable, then maybe I don't want to live under your roof any longer. I'm going after Lance."

The decision hits me like a bolt from the blue, and I turn toward my closet to throw on some clothes. I don't need to explain myself. I can talk to Killian when he cools down—if he cools down. In the meantime, I need to make sure Lance and I are alright. Because this feels so completely far from okay right now, I can't stop crying.

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“I don’t think so,” Killian says flatly, stalking toward the door.

“Excuse me?” I ask, giving him an incredulous look.

“You’re not going to see him,” he states bluntly. “And I don’t have time for this. I’ll deal with you later, but right now, I have more important things to think about than my pain-in-the-ass little sister.”

My heart plummets as I hear the key twist in my lock, trapping me inside my room. “You have got to be kidding me!” I scream, racing across the room to pound on my door. “Killian, you can’t keep me in here! Unlock this door right now!”

All I’m met with is silence, and I hammer on the door with the flat of my palm.

“Answer me, damn it!”

Grabbing the doorknob, I try to twist it, jerking it violently as I will it to give. But it’s no use. I can’t believe he locked me in here. Like some kind of prisoner.

Slowly, I sag onto the floor, wrapping my arms around my knees. And I bury my face as I start to sob. What a mess. I don’t know how I’m supposed to make this right.

I feel terrible.

I know Lance was most worried about Killian finding out that way, and now I see why. In my wildest dreams, I never imagined my brother could come unhinged quite like that. Then again, Killian’s been through so much. I’m not quite sure he is in his

right mind at this moment.

Still, I feel the aching emptiness in my chest with Lance's absence. And I wonder just how bad the pain might get if I never see him again...

Dark eyes leer at me above a cruel smile, and strong hands grip my shoulders when I turn to run.

"Let me go," I plead, struggling against the painful hold he has on me. I try to use one of Natasha's moves. Only this time, it doesn't work. Every time I drive my elbows down to break his hold, he strikes me across the face, and I see stars.

Then Lance is there, looming over my attacker, and relief floods me. He's here. I'm safe.

"I don't think so," Killian says, cocking his gun as he raises it.

"No, wait!" I scream, but it's too late.

The bullet explodes from the tip of the gun, hitting Lance between the eyes. He drops.

I scream. And I scream. And I scream. Until my throat is raw and burning.

I jolt upright in my bed, the cry dying on my lips, and I'm drenched in a bone-chilling sweat that makes me shiver uncontrollably.

But more than that, I feel the bile rising up my throat like a volcano about to explode. I'm going to throw up.

Throwing off my covers, I launch myself out of bed and race toward the bathroom. I make it with seconds to spare, collapsing onto my knees and pulling back my hair

before I regurgitate every last bite of the dinner Cheryl brought me.

It's the third day in a row that I've thrown up like this, and I'm starting to wonder if it's actually a stomach bug or if I'm just so upset and brokenhearted that it's making me sick. Whatever the case, I can't bring myself to eat most of the three square meals a day Cheryl brings me.

My nightmares have come back in full force with Lance's absence. And what's worse is that he keeps making cameo appearances. Only every time I see him, he ends up dying—usually at Killian's hand.

A fresh wave of nausea hits me, and I lean over the porcelain once more to retch, but nothing comes up. I've been able to keep so little down that when my body does decide to purge, it only takes one good round before I'm just dry heaving.

Breathing heavily, I lean my forehead against my forearm as I hug the toilet miserably.

"Quinn?" Sharp knocking on the far side of my bedroom door accompanies Killian's arrival.

"Go away," I moan, tears springing to my eyes. Because the last person I want to see right now is my brother. He just shot the man I love, and in such vivid detail, I'm still not 100 percent certain that it was a dream and not a memory. But the events around it don't quite make sense, chronologically, which makes me lean toward it being a bad dream.

"Are you sick?" Killian's voice is much clearer now, and I realize he's entered my room and is standing in the bathroom doorway.

"What do you want?" I ask miserably, refusing to look at him. I know I'm being a

brat, but day by day, I find it harder to forgive my brother when he's still refusing to be reasonable. And all the while, I feel the gaping hole in my chest growing more massive. If I don't find a solution soon, I'm scared it might just swallow me whole.

"I thought I heard screaming," he says gently, a note of concern tinging his tone.

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Of course he did. He chased away the only one who can keep my monsters at bay. A sob rips from my chest as I think of Lance. God, I miss him so much it makes me physically ache.

“Quinn, what’s wrong?” Killian asks, genuinely worried now as he kneels beside me.

“I miss Lance. I need Lance,” I cry, blubbering pathetically. I don’t know why I can’t seem to control myself, but it feels like all I do lately is throw up or cry. And on the rare occasion when sleep sweeps me away from my reality, it carries me off into my own personal hell.

Killian stiffens beside me, tension rippling off him in waves, and he stands abruptly. “Stop being dramatic,” he says, his tone suddenly frigid. “He hasn’t even come back to check on you, so I think we can both assume his feelings weren’t nearly as real as you had hoped.”

“You chased him away at gunpoint, you asshole!” I scream. “Of course he hasn’t come back. You threatened to kill him if he ever tried.”

“And I will. Look at what he’s done to you, Quinny.”

Suddenly furious, my nausea forgotten, I jump to my feet. “What he’s done to me? This is entirely your fault, Killian. You won’t even let me talk to him! And you never gave him a chance to explain!”

“I don’t need an explanation,” my brother says flatly.

“Get out,” I command. “I said get out! I hate you!” I practically chase my brother out the door, and then I break down crying once again.

After a long moment, I hear Killian’s miserable voice from the other side of the door. “I’m sorry, Quinny. I just want to protect you.”

I don’t answer, and eventually, I hear his heavy footsteps fade away.

Just dragging myself to the toilet has become an exhaustive effort. I can’t remember the last time I managed to keep food down. And at this point, just the smell of it makes me sick. So I brought my plastic waste bin to put beside my bed, and I curled into a ball.

I don’t know how long I’ve stayed in this position. But I know Cheryl has come and gone multiple times. Killian too. But I refuse to talk to him anymore. Not until he snaps out of it and comes to his senses about Lance.

“She’s doing this to spite me,” he growls lowly, my brother’s familiar voice worming its way into my feverish dreams.

“I don’t know.” That sounds like Natasha, and her tone is edged with concern. “She looks like she might actually be sick.”

Cool fingers press against my forehead, and I shiver violently.

“I think we should call Dr. Miller. You said she was throwing up?”

“Days ago. Maybe. But when I asked her what was wrong, she just said she missed Lance. I thought she was being dramatic, trying to make a point.”

“She hasn’t been drinking either,” Cheryl says with apparent concern.

Natasha sighs. “Killian. You’re being unreasonable.”

Thank you, Natasha.

“Look at poor Quinn. She’s not well. She’s hurting, and it doesn’t matter if you feel like he betrayed you. Think about it from her perspective. You threatened to kill the man she’s in love with. You said it yourself how crazy she is about him.”

“It’s a child’s crush that he took advantage of when he knew I wasn’t paying close enough attention,” Killian growls.

“Regardless of how you feel about it, you need to have a doctor look at Quinn.”

“I’ll call Dr. Miller right now.”

“Quinn? Can you hear me? Can you open your eyes?”

I don’t recognize the soft male voice, but it’s calm and reassuring, and it pulls me from my haunting nightmares full of cruel brown eyes and riding crops and torture devices.

“Hmm?” I murmur, checking to see if I can, in fact, lift my eyelids.

They feel heavy, but I manage it, only to find they grate like sandpaper across my eyes.

Kind blue eyes look at me through wire-rimmed glasses, and the gray-haired man gives me an encouraging smile. “Good. Can you follow my light with your eyes?”

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I try, though my brain feels sluggish, and I just want to close my eyes again. Something tightens around my bicep and another cool circle finds the inside of my elbow. Then it releases with a hiss.

“Her vitals look pretty normal, though she appears to be quite dehydrated. And if she’s been throwing up, I would say that’s most likely the cause. I’d like to run a few tests, and in the meantime, I’ll start her on some fluids to help with the dehydration...”

I think I drift off then, because I lose track of what the kind old man is saying.

And when I open my eyes again, I’m shocked at how much better I feel. How much more awake. Frowning, I sit up slowly and look around my bedroom. An IV’s been hooked up to my arm with fluids—to help rehydrate me, I recall. Which makes sense, now that my brain doesn’t feel so foggy. I’ve been unable to keep anything down for so long. Of course I got too low on fluids.

“Ah, you’re awake, and you look like you’re feeling better already.” That same kind-eyed older man shuffles toward me from the bathroom, where it looks like he’s been doing some bloodwork. “You’ve got a bit of color back in your cheeks, so I think we’re on a good track.” He smiles, his mustache spreading at the corners like wings.

“Am I sick?” I ask, grateful to finally have someone who can give me some answers about why I’ve been feeling so god-awful lately—beyond my broken heart.

“Overall, I’d say you’re quite healthy, Quinn,” the doctor says, giving my hand an encouraging pat. “Though you were quite dehydrated and your tests would say you’re

pretty depleted of vitamins. I'll prescribe you an anti-nausea medication to get you through the worst of it, and I would recommend you start taking a prenatal right away."

My heart skips a beat at the casual way he says it. "I'm sorry. A prenatal...are you telling me I'm pregnant?" I ask.

That can't possibly be true. Lance came inside me, what, a week ago? There's no way I would be experiencing morning sickness already. But if the doctor did blood work, then it must confirm I am.

Then it hits me. That first night Lance and I had sex. Briefly, he was inside me without a condom. But he didn't come without one. And while it's possible to get pregnant from precum, it's so unlikely, I didn't even think about taking a contraceptive.

But that's not all that happened is it?

Because by the time he was inside me without a condom, Lance had already come once. And if he had any remainingsperm from the first time...Oh dear God. I've been pregnant all this time.

"You are indeed pregnant, Miss King. From the looks of it, I'd say you're about a month along," the doctor confirms. "I believe congratulations are in order."

"Thanks," I breathe, too stunned to think straight.

"I've left the nausea medication on your counter along with a recommended brand of vitamin. Please call me with any questions or if your nausea continues, yes?"

"Right. Yeah, thank you, Doctor," I say as he packs his bag to leave.

My mind's still spinning when Killian knocks a few minutes later.

"Come in!" I call, and he does, his expression almost sheepish as he steps inside.

"How you feeling?" he asks gently—more gently than he's spoken to me in days.

"Better," I admit, then my stomach knots as I wonder exactly what I should tell him.

Everything. Because maybe if he knows, Killian will realize it was wrong to send Lance away. He's the father of my child. He should be here with me.

"Killian," I say cautiously, "I have something to tell you."

"Okay?" His eyes narrow suspiciously as he tips his head.

"You need to call Lance and tell him to come home. I'm pregnant, and he deserves to know."

"You're...what?" he asks, color rising in his cheeks.

"Lance should know he's going to be a father. He deserves a chance to be a father to our child and?—"

"Like hell he does!" Killian roars, making me jump. "That bastard took advantage of you, and he didn't even bother to use protection? If I ever find Lance, I'll kill him for knocking you up."

It's probably suicide.

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But I can't stay away any longer.

I love Quinn.

And every day without her is agony.

I'd hoped that after a few days, Killian might cool down and be willing to talk. I figured I could give him some space to wrap his mind around what happened. Probably scrub the traumatizing image of me naked in Quinn's bed from his mind. I don't blame him for reacting badly after the way he found out. That's exactly how I didn't want him to learn about us. But life just kept getting in the way.

Still, I'm grateful I didn't let life get in the way of me and Quinn. Because over the past month, I've come to love her more deeply than I ever knew I could. Which is why I need to mend things with Killian—or at least get us back where he is not going to kill me for stepping foot on his property.

But even though I've given him time to cool off, I've heard neither hide nor hair from Killian all week. And I can't keep waiting.

I need to see her. I need to make this right.

And though I'd rather live for Quinn than die for her, I'm willing to do either. What I'm not willing to do is live without her. This past week has proven that. I feel like a hollow shell of a man when she's not with me. Like the reason for life has been sucked away until all I'm left with is a gaping emptiness inside.

So I can't accept Killian's ultimatum.

Reaching into my pocket, I curl my fist around the small box there. I hope I get to use it.

I think Killian and I have a chance of working it out. After having known each other all our lives, I'm fairly confident that I can talk some sense into the man I still consider my brother. I've given him a week to cool down. It's time to talk.

And more than that, I need to talk to Quinn—because she hasn't reached out either. And I want to make sure that she still feels the same way about me as I do about her. That she wants me in her life. If she doesn't, I don't know what I'll do. But I know I can't keep waiting for a phone call. I have to see her.

And if she does want me, then I intend to tie her to me in every way humanly possible. Because the last obstacle holding us back is gone. Killian knows, and either he can live with it or he can't. But I won't let that stop me from making a life with Quinn. I've already potentially planted the seed for that future. And I want her to know that I'm here for a lifetime if she'll have me.

Taking a steadying breath, I climb the stairs to Killian's front door. And Donnie doesn't stop me, just gives his chin a subtle tip as he says hi and lets me walk on in. I'll take that as a good sign. Though I doubt I'll be met by any kind of welcoming committee. I'm sure Killian and I have plenty to hash out. But I'm ready for it. Whatever it takes to set things right.

Swinging the door open, I step inside. And the familiar sense of home washes over me. I've spent countless nights in this house, with Killian and his sister. And I've missed it considerably in the week I've been gone—second only to how much I've missed Quinn and Killian themselves.

“Hello?” I call, striding across the entry toward the main part of the house. But no one answers. It’s still early, so they might be having breakfast and I head in that direction.

As I round the corner, Killian’s there, standing outside his office.

“Hey,” I start.

But before it even has time to get awkward, Killian takes a step forward. And launches a right hook straight into my jaw. My head snaps back and I stumble backward, stunned by the unexpected cheap shot.

“What the hell?—”

With a roar, Killian launches himself at me, his shoulder slamming into my gut as he takes me down to the hard marble floor.

Apparently, time hasn’t helped him cool down. And as the air rushes from my lungs, I bring my hands up to protect my face from Killian’s next ferocious punch. He’s not holding back either as he hammers down on me relentlessly.

I’m all for expressing your anger, but I don’t entirely enjoy being pinned down to play someone’s punching bag. So I twist my hips, tossing Killian off of me so I can roll free of him.

That only gives me a brief reprieve, however, before he’s in my face again, swinging at me with the single-minded intent of causing as much damage as he can.

“Calm down, Killian,” I growl, throwing a single punch to make him back off.

It catches him on the temple, and Killian snarls as he shakes his head to clear it.

“I thought I warned you that I’d kill you if you ever came back, you lying sack of?—”

I launch a second punch, popping him in the mouth. Because I’m quickly losing patience if this is still about me not telling him about Quinn and my relationship with her. Sure, does that make me a bad friend? Yeah. I can see that. I’ve been grilling myself about it almost nonstop since the moment I realized I wanted Quinn.

But what kind of friend is he if he can’t even hear me out? How little must he think of me if he’s going to accuse me of taking advantage of her, of using her without regard for her feelings?

I gave him time to consider the bigger picture, and if he still doesn’t like it, then tough tits. I guess he wasn’t the friend I thought he was all these years.

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“I’m giving you one chance,” he growls. “Leave. Now.”

“What is your problem with me?” I snarl, bringing my arms up once.

And suddenly, I find my back up against the wall as Killian drives his fist into my ribs—and the freshly healed stitches Quinn put there. Grunting with the effort to block him, I ignore the intense burn that spreads across my midsection, warning me that the skin’s not strong enough to hold much longer.

Then a terrified scream splits the air, and my heart stops at the sound of Quinn’s familiar voice. “What are you doing? Stop!”

38

QUINN

I’ve never seen Killian come at Lance so mercilessly, and as pain flashes across Lance’s face, I’m struck by the terrifying thought that my brother might truly try to kill his best friend. And all the while, Lance seems to be doing little more than protecting himself. Fending off Killian’s brutal blows and only throwing out weak jabs to make Killian back off.

“Killian, what is wrong with you!” I shriek. “Get off of him!”

I want to intervene, but I don’t know how to help. And if I put myself in harm’s way, I have no doubt Lance will take a hit in order to protect me. So instead, all I can do is scream. But nothing seems to be getting through to my hot-tempered idiot of a

brother. I don't understand why he's being so ridiculous about this thing between me and Lance.

But unfortunately, Lance could not have picked a worse time to show up. I finally got Killian to calm down after hearing about the baby. We'd talked, and he'd decided to let me out of my room so I could eat with him and Natasha like a normal human being. I was hoping I could find a way to get in touch with Lance later today since Killian took my phone away.

And now here he is, my Knight in shining armor—in the flesh—getting his butt kicked by my hotheaded brother once again. I could throw something at Killian, I'm so mad. But I'm worried I might accidentally hit Lance.

“Killian, damn it, stop!” I shout, stomping my foot like a tantruming toddler.

“That's enough,” Natasha says, her voice sharp as she enters the room and stops by my side. “Killian, can't you see you're hurting her?”

And to my intense surprise, Killian stops. Heaving for breaths, he slowly backs down as he glowers at his best friend. I don't know what hold Natasha has on my brother, but I've never been more grateful to her in my life as he slowly turns to look at me. And his shoulders sink in defeat.

“I haven't laid a finger on her,” he growls, casting Lance a murderous look.

“You're hurting your sister all the same,” Natasha says gently. “Don't you see how much she loves you both? And now you're using her love for Lance to drive a wedge between you. Stop. I know you want to protect your little sister. But she's not a child anymore. And Lance is the last person she needs protecting from.”

“He used her. He...” Killian's eyes flash down to my stomach, and my heart flutters.

“I would never use Quinn,” Lance says, his expression pained as he looks toward me as if to plead his case.

And it breaks my heart if he thinks for a second that I doubted him.

“I fell in love with her,” he rasps, continuing his speech when Killian looks at him but remains silent. “And I tried to stay away, to stop it from the beginning, because I knew you would never forgive me.”

He looks at Killian, the pain in his eyes swelling with a visible sense of loss. “You’re my best friend. My brother. And I never wanted to do anything to disrupt that. So I never even considered looking at Quinn like that. But then, once I did, once I truly saw her, I couldn’t unsee how beautiful she is. I couldn’t go back to the way it was, because in my eyes, the sun and stars rise and set with Quinn. She’s the reason I wake up in the morning and my only desire to continue breathing. And when I’m not with her, I would rather not exist. So, that’s why I’m here. Because I would rather you kill me than to tell me I can’t be with her.”

It’s the most beautiful speech I think I’ve ever heard. And it’s the longest speech Lance has ever given—especially to anyone but me when we’re alone. It fills my heart with such joy to hear Lance say it. Because I was terrified that every day I didn’t call, he might decide to move on, to put me behind him in the hopes of mending things with Killian.

Killian seems stunned to hear Lance talk like that—particularly because he hardly talks at all. And never in more than short, limited sentences.

For a long moment, he doesn’t say anything at all. He just looks between me and Lance, as if he’s trying to decide how it’s even possible. His best friend and his sister. I agree, it’s not ideal, and I hate that it bothers Killian. But for me, it’s always been Lance. And I don’t know that I could ever find happiness with someone else. So why

can't Killian find a way to be happy for me?

“And you're ready to take care of Quinn?” he asks. “You're ready to take care of the baby?”

My stomach somersaults as Killian just drops a bomb on Lance. And I'm suddenly scared that while he said he wanted forever with me, he might not actually have been ready. Because Lance looks stunned, his blue eyes growing wide as the color drains from his face.

Oh God, what if he changes his mind?

I'm going to die of humiliation if Killian was right all along. But more than that, I'm not sure my heart can take losing Lance a second time.

“The...baby...?” Lance echoes, his strong brow buckling into a frown, and he finally meets my eyes again. “You're pregnant?” he asks.

Fighting back tears, I nod.

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And all the pent-up emotion in my chest comes spilling forth in a laughing sob as Lance brushes past Killian to sweep me off my feet. Stooping, he wraps his arms around my hips, lifting me from the ground as he holds me up and spins me in a circle.

It feels so good to be in his arms again, his beautiful blue eyes looking up at me like I'm the only thing in this world that matters. And his devastating smile is brimming with emotion. "We're having a baby," he says, this time more in wonder rather than as a question.

"We're having a baby," I agree, smiling so hard my cheeks start to hurt.

And Lance lets me slide down his body just enough to bring his lips to mine. He kisses me fiercely, passionately, his arms enveloping me as he holds me close against his heart. I can feel it hammering confidently in his chest.

"When did you find out?" he murmurs, pressing his forehead against mine as he closes his eyes.

"Yesterday," I say. "And you're happy?"

"Are you kidding? I meant it when I said I love you, Quinn. You're my forever." Lance pauses, his blue eyes deep and searching as he looks into my soul, warming my body.

And I gasp as Lance drops to one knee in front of me. My heart swells as he looks up at me adoringly. And pulls a ring box from his pocket.

“Oh my God, what are you doing? Where did you get that?” I gasp covering my lips with my fingers. Waving my hands in front of his face, I say, “Never mind, forget I asked that. You just keep going.”

Lance chuckles. “I know it might be fast, but I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. I was sure of it walking up those front steps to come find you this morning—before I even knew about the baby. And knowing we’re going to have a child together only makes me more certain that now is the right time to ask. So, will you make me the happiest man in the world? I want to prove to you every day that I can be the man worthy of your heart. I want to care for you and our little boy or girl. I want to come home to you every night and wake up to you every morning. Quinn King, will you marry me?”

Lance opens the tiny ring box, and inside is the most beautiful solitaire emerald cut diamond I’ve ever seen. It twinkles in the light, casting beautiful rainbows across the box and memorizing me. But even more significantly is the fact that Lance came here today wanting to propose to me. He wants to show me how much he cares for me. And God, I love him.

Giddy laughter bubbles from me along with my tears, and I can hardly wrap my mind around the roller-coaster ride of emotions I’ve been through lately. But I know without a shadow of doubt that Lance is the only man I want to marry.

“Yes,” I murmur.

39

LANCE

That one word has never sounded so sweet, and I rise to my feet so I can cradle Quinn’s face between my palms. And when I kiss her it feels like the heavens

themselves have opened up to sing because the woman I'm deeply, madly in love with wants to spend her life with me.

A low, deep throat clearing brings me back down to reality, and I flinch as I realize kissing Quinn as many times as I have in front of Killian might have been counterproductive to avoiding another butt whooping.

I turn, wrapping an arm around Quinn's waist as I look to see what kind of fury Killian is about to unleash. And I find Natasha tucked beneath his arm, one hand on her chest as she smiles at us warmly.

And to my intense relief, while Killian looks less than comfortable about watching me kiss his sister, who he's always been massively protective over—understandable—he seems to have calmed down about us being together.

“You're okay with this?” Quinn asks tentatively, eyeing her brother nervously.

“I think...I was too hasty in judging your intentions,” Killian says, his eyes meeting mine apologetically. “I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions about you taking advantage of Quinn. I just...I don't know. She's my kid sister, and I've known how crazy about you she's always been, but you never seemed to have any interest—which I was glad about. Until I realized you were having sex.”

Killian shudders, as if the thought of his sister having sex is the worst thing imaginable, and I do my best not to laugh. I'll let him remain in that blissful state of ignorance.

“Anyway, after seeing her so freaked out and vulnerable from what those Agosti men did...And knowing that I asked you to watch out for her...It felt like you were swooping in, looking for something physical when I knew she would think it's more.” Killian gives a one-shoulder shrug, looking uncomfortable as he scratches the

back of his neck.

“I get it,” I say. And I do. “You were looking out for her heart. I just thought you knew me better than that.”

Killian shakes his head, regret twisting his lips into a crooked smile. “I do. I’m sorry, Lance. And now that I can see how genuinely you love Quinny, I want to give you my blessing.”

Relief floods me to hear that because, as determined as I was to win Quinn back when I came today, I had feared I might have permanently lost my brother and best friend. “Thanks, Killian. That means a lot.”

My arm tightens around Quinn’s waist, and when I look down at her, the smile she beams up at me melts my heart.

Killian chuckles, and I look back at him, raising my eyebrows.

“You know, I tried damn hard to get Quinn on a different path in life. I’d hoped she might marry someone less involved in our world.”

“You and Daddy both,” Quinn says. “But I had other plans.”

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Killian chuckles, shaking his head. “I know you’ll be good to her, Lance. I can’t think of a more loyal person who I know will take care of her, and with you as a husband, Quinn will never be in danger. I think I can be satisfied with that.”

Natasha slaps his chest lightly. “You make it sound like he’s a fine consolation prize or something,” she scolds.

But I know what he means. I said almost exactly the same thing to Quinn. And if she’d wanted that life, I’d like to think I would be strong enough to let her be happy living it without me. But Quinn chose me. And I’ll spend every day for the rest of my life proving her choice was the right one. Because I want to be worthy of Quinn. “I get it,” I say. “Thanks, Killian.” I really am touched by his sentiment. I know it’s a high compliment that he trusts me with his sister’s safety and happiness. In a lot of ways, it’s the highest respect he could give me.

“Alright, come here, you love birds,” Killian says, striding forward with Natasha to pull us both into a hug. “Congratulations. On the engagement and on becoming parents,” he says, slapping my back and giving Quinn a squeeze.

I chuckle. “Yeah. A lot to happen in a day. And it’ll only get better from here.”

Natasha’s next, stepping forward to give us hugs and congratulate us. But I can feel a fragileness in her body that wasn’t there before she went to kill Lucian.

“You okay?” I ask, meeting her eyes.

She nods, her lips curving into a sad smile. “Just worried about my sister.”

“Have you heard from her?”

Natasha nods. “She’s...doing better than I expected. Though I don’t know if she’ll ever be happy, and I know that I’m largely responsible for that.”

Concern colors Killian’s eyes as he looks at his wife, wrapping a comforting arm around her shoulders. It’s no wonder his protectiveness is on overdrive. Natasha looks like she might cry.

“Tatiana’s smart,” I point out gently. “She won’t let Lucian manipulate her. Not for a lifetime.”

Natasha smiles, and this time, the warmth reaches her eyes. “You’re right. Thanks, Lance.”

With the tension about me and Quinn dissipating and Natasha seeming to find a modicum of peace over her situation, things seem to settle back into a more familiar realm of comfort. Only, it’s intensely more gratifying that I can show Quinn affection in front of people.

And I’m acutely aware of the fact that, now people know, I’m inclined to be touching her almost constantly. We head back to the kitchen to finish breakfast, where Quinn admits to a very distressing first week of morning sickness that ended in a doctor’s visit because she couldn’t eat.

But she seems ravenous now that the anti-nausea meds are working. And I love watching her down a full stack of fruit covered pancakes—while she’s sitting on my lap. A thrill races through me the first time I slide my fingers under her shirt and gently press my palm to her stomach.

A beautiful shade of pink colors her cheeks, and she glances shyly back at me over

her shoulder, sharing the private moment in silence as our eyes meet. We created a life together. And somehow, it feels incredibly satisfying to know we must have done it on our first night together. That while we ended up in this blissful state of joining our futures, in a way, we were doing that from the very first moment we spent together.

It almost feels like fate.

And while I don't necessarily believe in something so cosmic, it makes me intensely grateful that all the signs of the universe keep screaming that Quinn's the one for me. The woman I can't live without.

As Killian and Natasha seem to settle back into the state of newlywed happiness, it feels good to share that same kind of intimacy with my own person. I find it somewhat amusing that today, during Killian's considerable defense of why he thought I was using his sister, he also mentioned Quinn having a crush on me for a long time—a fact Quinn mentioned herself early on in our relationship.

How I possibly could have missed that fact, I don't know. But I love that while I was blinded by tunnel vision and a sense of loyalty to Killian and the King family, Quinn never had doubts. She knew what she wanted, and she got me.

It feels nice that she was as driven about me as she is about becoming a nurse.

And now that I've finally seen the light, I get to show her just how loyal I am.

It's not much compared to all Quinn's incredible talents, but I'll give it my best to be enough for her. Snaking my arms around her waist, I press a kiss to the curve of her neck.

“What do you say I take you back to my place tonight?” I suggest.

A soft shiver ripples down her spine, and Quinn's lips part on a gasp as her cheeks flush. "I'd like that," she says.

Me too. And more than that, I like that I can take her there without feeling like I'm betraying Killian. We're not sneaking behind his back.

We head out after dinner, and on the drive home, I savor the feeling of Quinn's hand wrapped in mine. After not seeing her for a week, I feel intensely attuned to her presence. The silky softness of her skin, the way she and I seem to move seamlessly within each other's orbits. It's something we developed over my time as her bodyguard that I hadn't even realized was happening.

Until suddenly, she wasn't there constantly.

I'll miss following her through her everyday routine.

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But now that the conflict between the Agostis and the Sokolov-King alliance has come to an end, Quinn won't need my constant protection. And Killian is in dire need of my skills as his right-hand man again.

Still, I fully intend to savor this night to its fullest.

And as I pull into the parking garage beneath my Brooklyn Heights penthouse, Quinn hums with a giddy anticipation that makes my cock stand at attention.

"I've missed you," she whispers as I open her car door and place my palm on the small of her back to guide her toward the elevator bank.

"You have no idea how much I've missed you," I growl.

"Really?" she asks, turning to me with soft green eyes.

The elevator dings, and the doors slide open, giving me an excuse to grasp her hips and slowly guide her back into the small compartment.

"Really," I murmur, pressing her back against the wall. I slip my key fob into the slot that will take us to the top floor.

Then I cradle the curve of her jaw with my palm, pressing my thumb against her chin so I can kiss her. I take it slow, brushing my lips lightly across hers. And electrical attraction ignites between us, making my temperature rise.

Quinn's lips part, her breath feathering across my face, and I lightly trace the seam of

her lips with the tip of my tongue. That seems to ignite a fire inside her, and Quinn throws her arms around my neck, bringing our lips together in a blazing kiss.

I groan, leaning into her and pinning her to the wall with my hips.

“You know what I just realized?” I rasp, letting my hands roam freely up the curves of her waist so I can feel the perfect swell of her breasts.

“What?” she murmurs, her eyes wide with innocent curiosity.

“I get nine whole months of coming inside of you without a condom.”

Quinn gives a sultry moan, her fingers combing into my hair and sending tingles along my scalp. “Lance Knight, you’re not wearing a condom with me ever again in your life,” she promises.

And I snarl at the thought of that. “Then I intend to keep you full of my cum until you’re dripping on the regular.”

“God, you turn me on,” she moans, jumping up to wrap her legs around my hips.

The elevator doors open a moment later, and we’re lucky we made it to the top floor without anyone joining us, because I’m not sure I would have stopped—even if they had. For all the times I’ve been with Quinn, I don’t know that I’ve ever needed her this badly.

One week without her feels like an eternity. And though I dreamed about her every night, my subconscious just can’t stack up to the real deal.

QUINN

I've only been to Lance's apartment once or twice in the past, and then, only briefly while I was here with Killian. But I can barely spare the gorgeous penthouse a glance as he carries me straight to his bedroom.

His lips only leave mine in order to trail kisses down my neck, and I groan when he sucks the skin over my clavicle into his mouth with bruising force.

"Are you trying to give me a hickey?" I gasp, my nipples hardening to stiff points at the blissful sensation.

"I intend to keep you well-marked so no man will dare think you're anything but taken," he assures me darkly.

I laugh softly, loving this possessive side of him even if it's entirely unnecessary. "Don't you think the ring will do that?" I ask, extending my hand behind his back so I can get another good look at it. It's striking, really. More beautiful than any ring I might have thought to pick out for myself. And somehow, it feels so perfect—just like Lance is for me.

"A hickey and the ring would be an even clearer statement," he growls, moving down a little further to suck another circle of skin into his mouth.

And if he keeps that up, I think I might just come in my panties. It's only been a week, and yet I've never felt so starved for pleasure. I've gotten used to just how often Lance makes me come. And without him, everything just feels...vanilla.

"You taste so damn good," he rasps, and I gasp as my back finds the solid wood of a door he pins me against.

Again, he grinds forward against me, reminding me how big and hard he is, how ready he is to be inside me. He turns the door handle, and as the barrier swings wide, he carries me into a beautiful spacious room that's nearly twice the size of mine.

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“Holy cow, Lance. What were you doing sleeping at our house when this is what you could come home to?”

“And spend a night away from you? I don’t think so.” He crawls onto the California king-sized bed with me, sprawling me across the silky gray blankets, and I love how gently he sets me down. Like he doesn’t want to playfully drop me for fear that it might harm the baby.

God, I can’t wait to see Lance as a father. If anyone could possibly get sexier with a child in their arms, I think it’s him. All brute strength and bulging muscle but with the most gentle touch I’ve ever known.

“How were your nightmares while I was gone?” he asks softly, his blue eyes dark with unspoken concern.

I shake my head, not really wanting to talk about it. I don’t know how to tell him the horror of watching him die night after night, of reliving my worst trauma, only to think he’s there to rescue me, and moments later to lose him all over again. I pray I never have another of those dreams again. And I definitely don’t want to breathe any life into them now, though I’m touched that he asked. “It doesn’t matter. You’re here now, and that chases all my demons away.”

“Oh, Quinn,” he murmurs, cradling one of my cheeks with his palm. “I’ll never leave you again.”

“I’ll hold you to that promise.” I smile, showing him I mean it playfully, but at the same time, I mean it. I never want to be without him. My world isn’t right without

him here, wrapped around me.

His fingers roam beneath the hem of my shirt, guiding it upward to expose my black lace bra, and he hums his approval as he strips my top layer. Then he leans down to tease my taut nipple through the sheer fabric.

I gasp, my back arching at the intensity of sensation. My nipples feel more tender, and I don't know if that's because of the time between us being intimate or if it's another sign of pregnancy I missed before. But as Lance lightly nips my swollen points, I'm on the brink of crying out with pain-laced pleasure.

"So responsive," he purrs. "I think I'm going to enjoy pregnant Quinn."

I whimper, my walls tightening at the way his words make me melt. I never really thought about it before, but Lance almost makes it sound like he finds the idea of me pregnant sexy.

Throbbing with the need to feel him inside me, I roll my hips along his length. "Please, Lance," I moan. "I've been going crazy without you."

He hums low in his throat, the deep vibration seeping into my chest and lighting me on fire. "You want me inside you?" he teases, easing down my body, his lips drawing a scintillating path to my belly button.

"Yes," I breathe.

And goose bumps erupt across my skin as he opens my pants slowly, playfully before hooking his fingers into the waistline. He drags the fabric down my legs, revealing me inch by inch. And all the while, his lips continue to caress my skin, forming a delicious path of friction in his wake.

“Well, I might just have to worship every inch of you first,” he murmurs, chucking my pants aside so all I’m wearing are a matching set of black lace underwear. “Especially if you’re going to be wearing lingerie like this.”

Heat radiates out from my core as he takes my feet in his hands and rests them against his pecs. Then he slowly kneads the underside of my arches with his thumbs.

“Oh...my...God,” I moan, my panties getting wetter by the second with how glorious his massage is.

“Hmm, you like that?” he teases and leans in to press a kiss to my arch.

And as he continues to massage, he slowly works his way up the inside of my legs, kneading and kissing and nipping my flesh. Each inch he climbs higher, I grow closer to the precipice of my release. And my thighs start to tremble as his tongue teases the inside edge of my panty line.

Hot breath washes across the damp fabric, and he inhales deeply, as if savoring the scent of me. Then he presses a chaste kiss to my clit through the soft lace.

“You’re torturing me,” I whimper, squirming beneath him. “I’ve waited so long...”

“And by the time I’m done with you, I promise you’ll be comatose with bliss,” he growls. “Because I’m not letting you sleep tonight.”

How is it the man who’s always been the strong, silent type can do the sexiest dirty talk? Or maybe it’s because he’s usually so quiet that I love it when he talks in the bedroom. Something about it drives me wild. And I don’t think I’ll ever get over it, because it only seems to get better with time.

Grasping my knees, Lance presses them against his shoulders and slowly leans over

me, spreading my thighs as he folds me in half beneath him. And by the time our lips touch, I can feel the underside of his thick length pressing between my folds even through the fabric of his pants.

The pressure is insanely arousing, and I try to rock beneath him, seeking friction. But he has me pinned down so thoroughly, I can barely move.

“Hmm, you are eager tonight, aren’t you?” he teases, rocking his hips to give me the relief I seek.

“Yes!” I gasp, somewhere between a cry of pleasure and a confession.

He chuckles, dark and sultry, and rocks forward again. “Such a good girl, so honest,” he praises, rewarding me with a third rocking stroke along my seam.

Then he leans in, his lips going to work on my neck once more. My pulse throbs in my aching nipples, and goose bumps ripple across my flesh every time he sucks my skin between his teeth.

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By the time he moves on to my chest, I'm sure I have a handful of bruised marks along my neck, and I don't even care. Because I'm so intensely turned on, I think I'll come if he grinds against me again.

"Such perfect breasts," he praises, reaching behind me to unclasp my bra and free them.

My knees still cage them in, creating cleavage where I wouldn't normally have some. And he licks the soft crevice, his gaze on me the entire time. It lights a blazing excitement in my core, and suddenly I'm burning up, unable to sit still with the intensity of my own heat.

Lifting my head up off the bed, I capture Lance's lips with mine, and I delve my tongue between his teeth. I'm trying to turn him on enough that he'll lose control with me.

And when he groans appreciatively, I know it's working.

"Alright, my sexy temptress," he purrs. "You win."

Rocking back on his knees, Lance grasps his shirt and swiftly strips it over his head, then tosses it to the floor. His pants follow a second later, and as his cock springs free, swollen and dripping for me, my mouth starts to water.

Last of all, he hooks his fingers around the thin lace of my panties and slowly guides them down my hips.

Then he spreads my thighs as he settles between them, his blue eyes burning with lust.

“I’ve been dreaming about you,” he murmurs, “trying to will you into existence in my mind.”

“Is this what you did to me?” I ask, my temperature rising when I think about him wanting me so badly he would dream of what he’d do.

“Something like this,” he agrees, a soft, wicked smile curving his lips. “But I always knew it was a dream, and when it was done, it was never quite as...satisfying.”

“How did you know?”

“This,” he murmurs, easing one hand between us to stroke two fingers between my slick folds.

I moan, my hips rolling instinctively with the sensual touch, and my breathing ratchets up as fresh desire throbs into my core. Then Lance lifts his fingers so I can see my juices glistening on their tips. He brushes them across my lips, smearing some of my tang there for me to lick up. And as I do, he slips his fingers into his mouth, sucking them clean with a deep groan.

“You just taste so damn sweet,” he growls. “Always so wet and so delicious. And all for me.”

I whimper as Lance’s silken tip finds my entrance, and he presses inside me, slowly at first but then growing faster. It’s like he can’t seem to help himself now that he’s buried in my depths. And it feels so good, my eyes roll back into my head.

“Oh God, yes!” I cry, my climax hovering on the brink after just a few thrusts.

And when he presses inside me a third time, I fall apart. All that building tension, the pressure and frustration stemming from withholding relief makes it all come crashing down on me with exponential force.

I scream his name, and I love that I don't have to worry about being quiet anymore. Because I don't know that I could be quiet with how hard I come.

Rippling along his throbbing length, I milk him hard. And all the while, Lance rocks inside me, stimulating my G-spot until it feels like one orgasm is rolling into another.

"God, you feel so good," he groans, stealing a fiery kiss as he moves on top of me, inside of me, all around me in the most glorious sense of overwhelming presence. "I can't wait to fill you up."

I whimper, pressing my lips together so I won't beg him to do it right now. Because just suggesting it has me so aroused, I'm ready to come again.

Lance groans as my walls clench, and I feel him stiffening inside me, on the brink of his own release.

"Come with me, Quinn," he rasps, and I can't help but obey.

Crying out, I come all over his cock, arousal gushing through my channel to mingle with the first hot burst of his seed. Warmth pools inside my belly. A deep, intense satisfaction. And I cling to Lance, riding out my waves of euphoria that crackle across my skin. My clit throbs, my walls pulsing in time with his cock.

And our breaths crash together as we ride out the intense release.

Softly, Lance eases out of me, and as he rolls onto the bed, he pulls me into his arms.

This, lying here in bed with him feels so good, so right, it fills me with intense love and radiant happiness. I'm so full of it, I could burst, and my heart swells in my chest until it presses against my ribs.

I have everything I've ever wanted—the man of my dreams, my brother's blessing, and now we're starting a family together. I'll be finishing nursing school at the end of this semester. And when everything felt so wrong and chaotic and without hope not long ago, now it all feels so incredibly right.

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I don't know how I got so lucky to deserve a man like Lance. But I've never felt such deep, intense contentment. I never want this happiness to end.

"I love you, my beautiful fiancée," Lance murmurs, nuzzling my neck with his nose. "The incredible mother of my child."

Hearing him say those things for the first time sends a thrill through my body, and I shiver deliciously as I snuggle closer to him.

"I can't wait to have a family with you," he breathes, his arm wrapping around my waist so he can press a palm to my stomach once more.

I cover his hand with mine as tears of joy sting my eyes. All his sweet nothings fill me with such joy because it shows me that this stoic man of few words has opened his heart to me so completely.

And as I lie here in his arms, I know that this is the happiest happily ever after I could have hoped for.

EPILOGUE

QUINN

"You look beautiful," Natasha says as she helps adjust my pearl studded veil over my curly locks.

"Thanks," I say, beaming as I look at her in the mirror.

My curls are pinned up in an intricate knot on top of my head with only a few loose strands to frame my face. I like the subtle makeup Natasha helped me perfect. I'd initially thought about going with that airbrushed look—the natural-looking but not natural makeup style. But Lance talked me out of it because he says he loves my freckles. And I loved that so much, I want to keep them on display. For him.

My loose, off-the-shoulder drape sleeves hang nearly to my elbows, their beaded fabric sheer to make it look light and airy. And the heart-shaped neckline of my dress is flattering to my newfound cleavage.

I smooth the flowing fabric of my white skirt over my baby bump. It's not incredibly noticeable yet—not that I'm trying to hide it. But the tulle frills of my dress and the empire waistline—chosen for comfort—do naturally mask it. I smile, knowing that even if our little girl won't be here for another four months, she's going to be a part of this magical day.

"You nervous?" Natasha asks.

"For the ceremony? Or the baby?" I ask, realizing she could have been watching me.

"Both? Either?"

"Honestly, no. I'm just excited. I've wanted to marry Lance since I was ten years old. And I always thought it would be fun to have babies. This seems like a pretty ideal time now that I'm done with school."

Natasha nods, her high cheekbones plumping slightly as she gives me a genuine smile.

I like my relationship with my sister-in-law. We've grown really close over the last six months. And I trust her with everything, from self-defense training to relationship

advice. She was an easy pick for my matron of honor—and my only bridesmaid.

“That’s so nice,” she says. “Seeing all your dreams falling into place. You and Lance are so good together. It’s hard to remember there was ever a time before you were a couple.”

I laugh. “You only say that because you didn’t know us very long before we got together. I promise, Killian would sing a different tune if we asked him.”

Natasha laughs too. “I’m glad we got his head screwed back on right.”

“Agreed.”

“And now he’s Lance’s best man.” She shakes her head. “Your brother’s an idiot.”

“Don’t I know it? But he’s an adorable idiot, which is why we keep him around.”

“Agreed,” Natasha echoes, and we both giggle.

I don’t know that I could have put this wedding together without my sister-in-law. I didn’t want a big fancy affair, but Idid want a party that would include all the King men. So we’re having it at Killian’s house, with the ceremony set to happen right on the beach.

Killian paid to have a temporary dance floor built across the heated pool.

And I’m excited because even Jamie, Finn, and Henry are flying in with their wives and children to be a part of it. It’s been a long time since all the King boys were in the same room with each other. And that’s always a hoot.

“The pianist is in place,” Kayla says, peeking her head around the door to let me

know. “Aw, you look so beautiful!”

“Thanks, Kay.”

“Girl, I’m so excited for you. I just want to find me one of those tall, dark, and brooding men like you found,” she jokes.

“Someday,” I assure her.

“Also, it’s 4:50. This is the ten-minute warning you asked for.”

“Thanks, Kay.”

My friend slips back outside, and I take one last deep breath, checking that I have everything. She and Ellie have been all-stars on coordinating the timing today. They took it upon themselves to get everyone where they’re supposed to be on time since I didn’t bother with a wedding coordinator.

Today is about as casual as it gets, and I’m grateful to all my friends for pitching in to make it feel that way.

“Ready?” Natasha asks.

“Yeah,” I say. And I let her help me down off the stool I was using to get ready.

I was back in my old wing of the house to get ready this morning while Lance stayed over on Killian’s side so we wouldn’t bump into each other. I haven’t seen him since we came over first thing for breakfast, and I find I’m near giddy with anticipation of seeing him in just a few minutes.

I rarely get to see Lance in a suit, and I can only imagine how good he's going to look for our wedding day, dressed in a tux and fully done up.

"Bouquet," Natasha says, taking hers and passing me mine.

Then we're heading down the stairs and toward the back doors that will take us to the beach. Rather than heels, I chose some strappy sandals for the occasion—because I'll have grass to walk down for my aisle. And because my feet have started to swell in anticipation of the baby.

We stop at the French doors, and I take a moment to look out at the setup the boys put together for us today. The metal hexagonal arch set as our backdrop is finely decorated with fresh flowers and ribbon—something we decided to leave to the professionals. But the guest chairs are nicely lined up along both sides of the aisle.

I smile to see all the rowdy, rough-around-the-edges King men dressed in suits with combed hair. They could almost pass as gentlemen, and I can't wait for the reception, when they'll let loose once more.

The pianist finishes her final welcoming song, and I catch my first glimpse of Lance in his black tux as he and Killian find their places at the end of the aisle. It's nearing sunset, so the long shadows make it tricky to make out Lance's face from this distance. But already my heart swells at the thought of meeting him down the aisle.

Gently squeezing my wrist, Natasha gives me one last warm smile. Then she makes her way down the grass aisle. Killian watches her, his eyes warm in a way that tells me he loves her just as much as the day he married her—if not more. And I'm so proud of my brother for finding such a perfect match for him. I love Natasha and consider her family. It's nice to have a sister around. And she's good for Killian.

Then the wedding march begins, signaling that it's my turn down the aisle.

The guests rise—no doubt directed to do so by our officiant. And I take my first step out onto the crisp green lawn. Heads turn as I walk myself down the aisle. And while my parents couldn't be here in body, I can feel them here in spirit, supporting both me and their foster son, who they loved just as much as their own children.

My eyes find Lance's as I reach the first row of guest chairs, and he steals my breath away. He looks absolutely striking in a black suit that accentuates his dark hair. But his blue eyes are what make my heart flutter. And I feel the baby give me a gentle nudge, acknowledging just how handsome her daddy is. Because his Mediterranean-blue gaze is following me with the warmth of the sun.

His signature scowl is absent today, replaced by the most tender expression I've ever seen. And it melts my heart at the same time as it makes me want to toss my bouquet and sprint down the aisle into his arms.

With monumental effort, I get there at a steady pace, and I pass Natasha my bouquet so I can take Lance's hands.

"You look stunning," he murmurs, the pads of his thumbs brushing across my knuckles and releasing butterflies in my stomach.

"So are you," I say, grinning despite myself.

Lance chuckles. "Thanks."

"Welcome, friends and family of Miss Quinn King and Mr. Lance Knight. We're gathered here today to celebrate the union of this sweet couple..."

We picked a simple ceremony—short and sweet—and I'm so riveted by Lance's gaze, I scarcely hear the officiant who has us repeat our lines after him. Tingles ripple up my spine when it's time to exchange rings. And Lance's warm fingers gently

slide my ring onto my finger symbolizing the infinite nature of our union.

“I love you,” he mouths as he does it. And my eyes sting with unshed tears at the unexpected affection.

“I love you too,” I mouth. And then I slide the simple gold band onto his hand.

“By the power vested in me by the beautiful state of New York, in the witness of friends and family, it is my great privilege to pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride!”

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And Lance doesn't hesitate to snake his arms around my waist and pull me close. Arching me backward, he curves his body along my length as he kisses me deeply. The crowd goes wild, all those civil-looking men suddenly back to their rowdy, brazen selves as they wolf whistle and catcall.

Hand in hand, Lance and I walk back down the aisle, and I can't stop smiling as our guests cheer.

We make it as far as the French doors of the house before Lance pulls me into his arms once again. And this time when he kisses me, it's with far more tantalizing passion. Hand cradling the back of my head, he strokes his tongue between my lips. And he doesn't care in the slightest if he steals some of my lipstick as he tastes me deeply.

He kisses me senseless, and by the time we break apart, I'm gasping for breath.

"What was that for?" I ask, smiling up at him.

"You're the most beautiful bride I've ever seen, and I just couldn't resist," he rasps. "Now, I intend to take you up to your room and take you as my wife for the first time."

I giggle as he grasps my hand and hauls me toward the stairs. "Lance, we're supposed to be getting ready for the reception."

"We'll be quick," he growls. "You can leave your dress on."

And when he casts his heat-filled gaze in my direction, my stomach quivers with anticipation. For all the years I longed for him, I craved him and thought he would never feel the same, I can't believe Lance Knight ended up wanting me.

Of all the women in the world he could have fallen for, how did he fall in love with me?

I'm not sure I'll ever know how I got so lucky. But I love how insatiably he craves me. It makes me feel beautiful, desirable, irresistible.

And I feel exactly the same way about my Knight in shining armor.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Tatiana

"Ah-ah-ha," Lucian Agosti chides, cocking the gun he has pressed against Natasha's temple as he brings his face closer to her ear. And that slow, steady smirk spreads across the Italian don's insultingly attractive face. With raven hair trimmed short and combed stylishly back from his Roman features and a mesmerizing shade of hazel eyes, he could easily be mistaken for a male model.

And if I didn't hate him with every fiber of my being, I could even call him handsome. But right now, all I can think of is how desperately I want him dead. Because he didn't just kill my father. He's holding my sister hostage so he can take what he wants from me. My birthright. The Bratva my father left in my hands when he died.

My heart stutters painfully at how vulnerable Natasha is right now, her hands tied to incapacitate her, the barrel of a cocked gun resting casually just inches above her ear. Even with an army at my back, I can't do anything to free her—not with my sister's

body shielding Lucian's. Any attempt to shoot him could end up killing her. Which means my Irish allies, Killian King, Lance Knight, and all their men, are just as helpless as I am. I can feel the tension rolling off Killian in waves.

I know how much he loves my sister. He would do anything for her. He tried not to let her go on this stupid mission, and I should have listened to him. I should have let Lance infiltrate the Agosti estate and kill Lucian. But I let my need for revenge and Natasha's thirst for blood cloud my common sense. I trusted in her abilities as an assassin—something I've never doubted for an instant because she's never given me a reason to believe she could fail.

But it's Lucian I continue to underestimate. My father did, too, and it got him killed. But I should have known better. After losing both my parents to the cold-blooded mafia don, I shouldn't have risked Natasha's safety. And now I've given Lucian all the leverage he could want. I'm not just a fool. I'm responsible for where this entire conflict goes from here. If anything happens to my little sister, her blood will be on my hands.

"Alright. No more interruptions, lovebirds," Lucian taunts Killian and Natasha as they share an intense look of longing—a silent communication with everything on the line. "It's time to let the grown-ups talk. So, Tatiana—you don't mind if I call you Tatiana do you?" he asks, his hazel eyes dancing as they find mine.

Heat races through my body as fury ignites deep in my belly. He seriously wants to make jokes right now? "You can call me whatever the hell you want," I growl, "so long as you get that gun out of my sister's face."

He hums with amusement, his proud features feigning a thoughtful look. "Funny you should say it like that, because what I would love most to call you right about now is wife."

My stomach drops, my blood running cold at the horrifying thought. And a gasp escapes my lips before I can compose myself. How could he possibly think I would marry him after everything he's done? Then again, with my sister's life on the line, I would do just about anything to protect her. What is the price of an unhappy marriage compared to watching my sister die? I've already watched Lucian kill both my parents. He won't take Natasha from me. No matter what I have to sacrifice. Still, my skin crawls with the thought of tying myself to the man I hate more than anyone in the world.

"So, what do you say, Tatiana?" he prods, his eyes greedy with the look of a man who knows he has me cornered and is about to get exactly what he wants. "Marry me. Today. And before you say a hasty no, just think of it. We could form a lasting alliance between our two great families. Any sons you bear me will rule over both our territories when they come of age. Hell, I'll even agree to leave you in charge of the Sokolov men for as long as you desire. The rest of our lives if that's what you want."

That proposal almost sounds... reasonable. If Lucian hadn't already dragged our feuding empires into an all-out war. I know my father never would have approved of the arrangement—he didn't believe in bartering his daughters in order to strengthen ties with other families. But if it will save my sister's life and stop this bloodshed that makes me queasy every time I think about it, then isn't it my responsibility as pakhansha to protect the men of my Bratva? "You... don't want to rule my territory yourself?"

"Well, of course I do," Lucian says coyly, his sculpted lips curling into a beautiful sneer, and it pisses me off to realize that, as much as I hate him, I do still think he's one of the most gorgeous men I've ever met. "But that's why it's called a compromise. Now, I'd say it's a pretty generous offer—if I do say so myself. But know, this marriage will be a contractual alliance, one you will be agreeing to in front of all your men and mine—and the Kings, for that matter. So, I would recommend you take a moment to seriously consider it before you give your answer."

Another pregnant pause settles over the battlefield as my emotions wage war inside me. I'm not one of those self-sacrificing types. Typically, I prefer strategy to noble martyrdom. If I think long and hard enough, I can find a way around my enemies' plots. But Natasha has been my family's ace in the hole for as long as I've been concocting strategies. She's our faceless assassin, our inside man who can take out any bastard who thinks he has the upper hand. And now Lucian's threatening to expose her to the world. If anyone found out who she really is, it wouldn't just destroy my sister. It would most definitely get her killed—in the most brutal fashion.

As if he can read my thoughts, Lucian adds, "If you won't accept my conditions, just remember, I do fully intend to hand the lovely Mrs. King here over to the families she's wronged over the years. Who knows, maybe I'll set up an auction and give her to the highest bidder. I bet she'd go for an impressive price. And then I'll let you watch as they tear her apart. And you and I will both know that you could have done something to stop it—if only you could have set aside your pride and looked at what's best for your people."

"I'll do it," I state, the answer jumping from my lips without hesitation. "I'll marry you." It rips my heart out to think of letting anyone touch my sister. And though I know it's going to land me in a lifetime of misery, married to a man I loathe, I would rather suffer that fate than watch another person I love die. I can't do it. I'm just not strong enough.

I can see Natasha's look of horror, and I try not to think of what she must make of my decision. She's always been the brave one, the first one to put herself and her safety on the line for our family. I always hoped that, if it came down to it, I would be strong enough to do the same. I just can't believe that of all the ways I might sacrifice myself, this is how I have to do it. Giving myself willingly to the coldest villain New York has ever seen.

“Today?” Lucian presses.

“Today,” I agree, my throat tight, my heart pounding.

“Ti, no,” Natasha pleads, trying to take a step forward.

I can see the remorse in her eyes. She feels responsible for what’s happening, but she’s not. I’m the one who let her sneak onto Lucian’s compound. I’m the one who allowed her to walk straight into a trap. And I won’t let her suffer the consequences for my poor judgment. Killian was right. I never should have granted her permission to go in alone. And now, I’m going to face the consequences of my miscalculation because that’s what a truepakanshashould do. That’s what my father would have expected of me.

“Done,” Lucian says, bringing a ringing sense of finality to the negotiations. “Why don’t you come untie your sister, then? And you and I can head to the church together?”

The church? He can’t possibly intend to marry me today? Now? Could he? But I can’t back out of the agreement. Not without jeopardizing Natasha’s safety. So, chin held high, I stalk coolly up the gravel drive and climb the terrace steps. And all the while, I feel as though I’m walking willingly toward my death.

The only thing keeping me on my feet is the hope that Natasha will be safe.

And when the deed is done, I will kill Lucian myself.

I've never taken a man's life before. I abhor the sight of blood. But I don't know how else to live with my decision. I'm going to kill Lucian Agosti. If it's the last thing I do.

"Ti, please," Natasha whispers as I climb the final step. "Go back. It's not too late. Nothing is worth that sacrifice."

With a soft smile, I stop in front of my sister and reach down to untie her bindings. "You are," I promise. I would do anything for my sister. I love her more than anyone else on this planet. And with our parents dead and gone, it's my responsibility to protect her.

I know Natasha thinks she's the strong one. But I won't let her die. If Lucian's right about one thing, it's that my pride is not worth her life. My pride isn't worth anyone's life. Not my sister's, not the Sokolov men under my protection.

"And so are all the men Father entrusted to my care," I add. "If this is what it takes to keep you all safe, then this is what I'll do."

Natasha's restraints fall to the ground, and she throws her arms around my shoulders, pulling me close as she bites back a sob. And I swallow the painful lump in my throat as I give her a gentle squeeze before pulling back. Then I cup my younger sister's chin in my hand. "Go to your husband, sister."

"I love you," Natasha murmurs. She squares her shoulders, and her feet pick up their pace as she races down the steps.

Her new Irish husband rushes forward to meet her, sweeping her into his embrace, and only then does the icy fist around my chest relax. My sister's safe. Killian will protect her. And he damn well better continue to cherish her if I can't be around to make sure of it.

“Killian,” I say, lifting my voice commandingly. “You be good to her.”

Killian gives me one solemn nod, the look of gratitude in his eyes reassuring me that his feelings for Natasha run so deep, I will never need to worry about her in his care.

My men, on the other hand, need a leader to protect them. To give them the order that will stop the bloodshed and save their lives. I only hope they won’t mutiny against me for my choice. I know Bratva men hate weakness. And surrendering to the enemy is about as cowardly as it gets in their eyes. I was already clinging to my new reign by a threat. This might be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. After today, I might not have an army to rule—even if Lucian is willing to let me keep my title.

Heart hammering against my ribcage, I command authoritatively, “Muzhchiny, idite domoy,” telling my men to go home.

And to my intense relief, as one, the Sokolov men gather our dead, hoisting them in our vehicles before they depart. The Kings follow, and as the driveway empties, I finally feel like I can breathe again. No matter what happens to me now, I’ve done all I can to protect the people I swore to lead and defend.

“Come, principessa,” Lucian says smoothly beside me, offering his elbow like a gentleman—though we both know he’s about as far from that as a man can get. “Let’s find you a suitable wedding dress.”

Icy horror grips my chest once more at his words. And I feel the bars of my prison closing in around my freedom. This is the fate my father worked so hard to avoid. He didn’t want his daughters trapped in a loveless marriage. Hell, I’m pretty sure my father would have preferred if neither of us ever married—because he didn’t believe any man was worthy of us.

But I trust that Natasha loves Killian. And even if he doesn’t deserve her, I know my

sister's husband would do anything to make her happy. That will have to be enough. I suppose in our world, if one good marriage can come out of a family, it's better than most Bratva daughters could hope for.

And even if my marriage is miserable, I won't lose the empire my father poured all his blood, sweat, and tears into building into what it is today.

Cool air washes over me as Lucian guides me into the luxurious mansion occupying the vast majority of the compound's acreage. And I'm stunned by the beautiful rustic, classic Italian decor of his grand home. Exposed wood beams extend across the vaulted ceilings, with cream-colored walls and terracotta floors. Rather than doors, archways connect each room, creating a smooth, flowing feel to the elegant space. And though I've never been to Italy, I imagine this is exactly how it would feel to step inside some Roman palace or Florentine estate.

My feet hesitate as I take in the beautiful entry, and I can tell Lucian observes my unquenchable awe by the way he pauses to smirk at me.

"Not what you were expecting?" he teases lightly.

"Honestly, I was picturing dungeons and torture chambers to go along with your black heart," I state scathingly.

Lucian gives a low chuckle, and the deep sound of his amusement vibrates through my bones, raising the hair on the nape of my neck at the same time as it makes my stomach coil with a strange warmth.

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It's unfathomable that a man as cruel as my soon-to-be husband could be so dangerously enticing. I've never been this close to him before, and I find it deeply unsettling that I like the way he smells. The soft, clean scent of lemon and vetiver surrounds him, and when I breathe deeply, a shiver races up my spine.

He guides me up the sweeping stairwell, my heels rapping sharply with each step. And while I march to my doom, I can't help but notice how peaceful the house is—mere minutes after a fire. No one's in a panic. The few guards that pass give me a respectful nod.

Lucian opens the wide double doors to a bedroom, and my heart jolts as soon as my eyes land on the bed. But my momentary flash of fear—that he might have other intentions than a wedding right now—is quickly squashed.

"These should all be in your size," he says, gesturing to a rack of luxury-line wedding dresses all tucked safely inside designer clothes bags. His eyes skim down my body appreciatively. Then they flick back up to my face. "Lucia will help you try them on. If any need alterations, she'll do that as well."

"You're really going to insist we marry today? Why even bother with the wedding dress, then?" I demand. "It's not like my friends or family will be there. And I doubt you have anyone you could truthfully call a friend." The snide remark is out of my mouth before I can think better of it—before I can consider how wise it is to be insulting Lucian when I have no real means to protect myself, no one to help me.

But rather than seeming angry, or even insulted by the remark, Lucian actually laughs. "You know, you might be right. But people in our position don't really have

the luxury of friends, do we? But I will have an audience for us. Anyone who's anyone will be here for the ceremony I have planned. And if you'd like, I'm happy to call your sister back to attend."

"No," I say sharply. I don't want Natasha anywhere near Lucian ever again. Definitely not so she can attend this farce of a wedding. But then Lucian's words really start to sink in. "You already sent out invitations? You planned for this wedding today?"

A wicked glint lights Lucian's captivating hazel-gray eyes. "Took you long enough," he teases.

"This is how you intended things to go all along," I realize, my stomach plummeting. "You knew I would agree to marry you to save my sister's life."

"I knew," he confirms, turning to face me as I take a half step back.

"How long have you been planning this?" I ask, icy understanding trickling through my veins.

"Since the day your father refused to consider my proposal," he murmurs, stepping close to hook a finger under my chin.

And I can scarcely breathe as he lifts my face so our lips are mere inches apart.

"What proposal?" I breathe, terrified that I already know.

"Poor Tatiana," Lucian says, his voice laced with dark pleasure. "Don't you even know? All this bloodshed, all this death could easily have been avoided if your father simply would have agreed to let me marry you from the start."

Nauseating horror twists in my gut as his words land with crushing force upon my

shoulders. Lucian killed my parents to be with me? He's spent months waging war between our families. He laid a trap knowing perfectly well that I would send my assassin in to kill him. And he used that leverage to force my hand. But then, does that mean...?

"Did you know? About Natasha?" I ask, my voice quivering with fear. Who is this man that's outsmarted me at every turn? I've spent my life strategizing, learning from a father who knows all the ins and outs of this very intricate game we mafia leaders play. And Lucian just manipulated me like it was child's play.

The slow smirk that spreads across his face makes me shudder violently.

"You see, principessa, I know how to keep secrets too. When given the right...incentive," he purrs. "And I have a feeling you're going to give me all the reason I could ever need to keep that secret locked away nice and tight."