



# Seduce & Destroy

**Author:** *Poppy Mercer*

**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Crime And Mafia, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Laney Ravencroft has always lived in the shadow of her powerful, criminal family—a life of gilded cages, haunting loneliness, and a relentless search for freedom.

When her beloved grandfather vanishes, and her ruthless father seizes control of the Ravencroft Estate, Laney's world spirals into a dangerous web of secrets and betrayal. Forced to relocate to the eerie village of Great Tenor, where dark memories and old enemies linger, Laney's life takes an unexpected turn with the arrival of Kenna, a mysterious and captivating enforcer.

Kenna Whether is everything Laney has longed for—confident, enigmatic, and strangely familiar.

But as the two women are drawn together, Laney's feelings for Kenna deepen into something more than she ever anticipated.

Amidst the looming threat of a family war and the chilling echoes of the past, Laney must unravel the truth behind her grandfather's death, confront her father's brutal ambitions, and navigate a forbidden attraction that could either save or destroy her.

In a world where loyalty is everything and love is a luxury few can afford, Laney faces an impossible choice: to follow her heart or to uphold the legacy of a family steeped in blood and vengeance. Will she uncover the secrets buried in the ruins of her past before it's too late, or will her quest for truth lead to a destiny she never imagined?

All she knew was that she needed her.

**Total Pages (Source):** 109

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## PART I

A wonderful likeness

Prologue

LANEY

Two weeks before...

“It’s not blood, it’s wine.” I said while I stood staring at the red puddle at my feet, holding the neck of the bottle. Liquid dripped from the shattered glass body and stained my hands a crimson not unlike that which rapidly coursed through my veins.

Father said nothing from his position in the doorway.

I wanted to beg. These bottles were old. It’s not my fault.

But he just stood there. The guilt was seating at me the longer he stayed silent.

“I can explain—”

“Your grandfather is missing,” he finally said.

My head shot up to meet his gaze, but his eyes were unseeing, staring right through me. Or rather, down at the puddle by my feet, I slowly realised, not at me at all.

“He didn’t make his weekly check-in.”

It wasn’t a surprise. In his latest years, Edward Ravencroft redacted his life to show only the parts that made up a strong leader. Nothing of his kind heart or filial love that I knew him for. Between weekly check-ins and operational briefs, he led the Ravencroft Estate from afar and hid his face in a remote cabin up North with a cloak of shame. Alone. While I knew that the Ravencrofts ruled from a gilded cage, I didn’t know why our family was such a burden to him.

As Father puffed out his chest, his eyes caught the light. They were glistening, but not in a sympathetic way, I realised. It was pride. “If someone is after him, we must be vigilant and potentially go incognito. Until we locate him, I’ll be stepping up as interim figurehead of the Ravencroft Estate.”

No, no, no. Please, no. The leash around my neck tightened.

In my anxious state, I’d ripped a nail from my forefinger, it stung. “Father, I’m sure he’s okay. He’s resilient enough, he could’ve—”

“In twenty-five years, that man hasn’t broken contact once. I’d assume the worst if I were you.” He didn’t even appear saddened.

“That’s your father!”

“And that’s why we need strong leadership to efficiently channel our energies to find him.”

“You can’t just replace him!” I whispered, bitter. He couldn’t be gone. He was the backbone of syndicate operations, distance never seemed as far with him in charge. But Father was no longer in the doorway to hear my protest. “We’ll find him.” I told myself.

I lived similarly to my grandfather, but I didn't take the same comfort out of it as him. Instead, I was under strict curfews, awaiting the time when Father would finally see that I could step foot on the concrete pavements of London and not set the world on fire. He would love to see the streets ablaze. I did not doubt it, but he wouldn't allow me to be burned by the flames.

Loneliness clung to me harder than the leash Father held me on. But alas, that was the life of a mafia princess. Until I proved to him that I was capable of this lifestyle, I had to suck it up and hope that someday the mean streets of this city would meet me.

My gaze returned to the pool of red at my feet. A maid walked past the door, finding me alone staring at the stain. "The wine will soak in the wood, darling." She said, softly.

I breathed a sigh of relief. That'll tidy itself up then.

"No!" My eyes snapped open at her tone. "Clean it up now, it'll stain!"

"Oh-oh!" I fumbled. "Okay." My clumsy hands found a tablecloth to fashion as a cleaning rag and repeatedly dabbed at the liquid. It wasn't pretty. I was smearing the wine more than I was cleaning it up. All I wanted was a nice glass of wine to fill the void in my stomach that the pills helped fill in my head. Anxiety induced a pounding migraine, and soon, my energy level fell to zero.

When I eventually lifted most of the liquid from the floor, I called the only person who could get me out of my head. My one friend. My cousin. And by that time, I was close to tears.

The phone rang three tones before she picked up. I sighed as soon as I heard her voice. "Laney? Oh my god..." Her voice was thick with tension. "Is it true? I just heard the guardsmen chatter, I didn't think—"

“It’s true.” I nodded though she couldn’t see me.

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“I’m so sorry this is happening.”

No proper response came to mind. I couldn’t accept her commiserations right now, accepting the situation was the furthest thing from my mind. I needed a plan. Something to look forward to before I melted in a puddle like the wine that seeped into the cracks of the hardwood floor. But it was fear that overruled my thoughts.

“It’s so much worse than I imagined. I’m panicking!” I said. I could tell it wasn’t what she was expecting, but God, it was honest.

“What?” She asked, anxiety filtering into her voice. “What happened?”

“With Grandfather’s disappearance, father promoted himself.” It poured out of me. If he was taking this as an opportunity to escalate operations, especially to the point of outgrowing our home, and it meant only one thing. “I’m scared he will move us away.”

“No way! London is your home and business! Your father can’t just—”

“Tilly, I don’t want to move away from the city. I can’t stand the quiet.”

“I know Laney, I—” A distant cry sounded in the call's background. It was piercing but, in a way gentle. “Sorry. I swear that girl can sense something is up before I can. Georgia...” She cooed to her nine-month-old daughter. The ink on her marriage certificate barely dried before she announced her pregnancy, and with the baby, her priorities changed. “I hope they find him soon. I can’t— We can’t have more stressors in our family. I won’t regret bringing a child into this world.”

I hadn't seen her in so long, I needed a friend. "If he moves us," I began. "Can... can you come visit me? I know you have a baby and a husband now, and things are different, but—"

"Laney, Laney, yes," she said. "I'd love a weekend where it's just us girls. Georgia is amazing, but I need a break too. I'll be there, promise."

I lifted a finger on my left hand. "My pinky is up."

"So is mine," she replied.

"Promise." We said in unison, our signature. Soon after, she hung up. Something about her husband needing her or something. I could cry.

Tilly was three years younger than me and had it all.

I was twenty-two and didn't even have a key to the front door.

I'd only known independence once. It was brief and according to my father, not to be repeated.

Every Christmas, I used to wish to go to school.

And each year, Father gave me books instead to develop my intellect, he used to say. Grandfather would look into the fire every time I'd ask. My father taught me to read prose before navigating a proper conversation, claiming that words on a page could be the windows of my life. But books could never replace the desire for connection. I could feel it in my bones, even though I couldn't articulate it to him, something was missing from my upbringing.

Then, a mysterious present appeared under the tree that wasn't neatly rectangular. It

was soft, and when I opened it, I cried. I tore the paper away to reveal a tartan skirt, a blazer and a tie. Tucked in the breast pocket of the blazer was a note for January enrolment to St James's Academy.

Signed, Grandad xx

I ran into his arms. That day was one of the few days when I saw him smile.

Please, be okay granddaddy. I vowed it to be true.

Two weeks later, with a skip in my step, I walked the corridors of a real-life school. Too soon, I discovered that the hollow in my chest wasn't going to be filled by simply being around people but by getting close to them.

My gleeful smile wasn't welcomed by many. It turned out that spending my entire life under the thumb of a criminal father and a rotating door of staff hadn't equipped me with great social skills. My father thought it was depression; I thought it was circumstance. My overeagerness to learn and unearned confidence designated my social status as weird, so quickly I resigned to the outskirts of social circles, merely an observer.

There was a girl, though. A little older, a little taller, and stunning.

She made it all worth it.

I only saw her between classes, looking almost ethereal in her confident stride. Her hair was the darkest brown I'd ever seen, catching the wind with each step she took. I admired her like a girl did her mother in later years. It wasn't a crush but an attraction I'd never felt. She was everything I wanted to be and everything I feared I would never be. My heart ran marathons in her sightline, but despite my fear, I always wished her eyes would find me as mine did hers, but they never did.



I dropped out on my birthday—also, the anniversary of my mother's passing. No one noticed my absence as I hid in the girls' bathroom. My face stared back at me in the mirror as I passed the morning in the science block toilets, sitting in a stall with the door open. It was quiet, and the motion sensor lights blinked off. I was truly alone. The crushing weight of loneliness felt like a fracture of the brain as tears poured down my cheeks.

I felt a presence that I knew was the girl. Would she finally look at me? Talk to me? Like me?

I stood and walked out of the stall, my vision clouded by tears, but no one was there. With a sigh, I hunched over a sink. The crush of solitude began anew when I felt something behind my back. A hand placed softly in the centre of my back, its thumb repeatedly combing the fabric of my sweater. It was the first touch I felt in years.

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I didn't look up, it was still dark, but I knew it was her.

The girl.

It was just a feeling, but the way that I had built up the affection of this girl in my head was so immense that, compared to little else I had experienced, it was inherent. My crying eased. But this tenderness quickly turned sour.

"Your mother warns you to beware of the assassin," she whispered.

What a strange thing to say! I had thought, but a tear had run down my cheek at that moment, and I was pulled out of my pity with want to impress her. Abruptly, I straightened my back and wiped my face with my hand, triggering the overhead lights to come on, and the room revealed as empty.

A teacher found me crying soon after and assured me that no one was there— that no one fit her description that went to St James's, she said. Hallucinations, they said. Nothing that couldn't be fixed with prescription drugs, Father said.

Little did he know.

His black boots came into view again bringing me back to the present moment.

"Oh, and one last thing. We will be moving operations to a remote location. Say goodbye to London, Laney, and say hello to a new life in Great Tenor."

No!

But Great Tenor? I wasn't sure where I'd heard that before.

"Please, Father, we're inconspicuous enough here."

He walked out before I could finish my rebuttal.

So, I continued to dream of that girl.

Sometimes, I wondered if that was all she ever was.

And now, I would be the furthest away from her that I'd ever been.

## Chapter 1

### LANEY

We got the news early one morning.

"His body was found." My father announced to the new soldiers on the estate in Great Tenor. His words lacked compassion. No one in this room even flinched. "Power has been transferred to me. My first action as de facto leader is to raise an army. Consider this your warning: we are on lockdown. His death has been ruled as suspicious. The last of the incoming cadets arrived yesterday and are training now. Prepare for the worst at any time, lads. Someone is after us; your task is to defend Ravencroft to your death."

While the group stood at attention, my jaw dropped. Death. It had been a long time since this family faced serious conflict. Since before I was born, nothing more than a pub brawl or casino fraudster threatened our existence. Was this the end?

Richard Ravencroft looked out at the crowd in perfect control. "Dismissed."

Half my mind said he did it, but even his cunning nature was skilled, not incidental.

As the room emptied, I went to follow, but Father gripped my elbow. A grave expression dawned on his face. “Laney, this is bad.” His deep baritone voice wavered. It was unnatural. Leaning closer he said, “It was a targeted attack.”

A generation ago, the Ravencroft family had a sister family, the Karsteins. Their union evoked a bloody reign of transatlantic drug trades and backroom charades, garnering fortunes that no bank could hold. The Karsteins dealt in controlled substances and artillery fire, while the Ravencrofts specialised in money laundering and blade work.

It was a dark time for the city of London, but the children of the syndicate were sparkling gold. I didn’t grow up in the same grandeur. The partnership broke down before I was born. The Karstein family home was scorched, killing their entire lineage, and we retreated to a quiet neighbourhood. Reserved to rebuild our wealth and stature in the quiet corners of the world. Initially, we endeavoured to blend into the London cityscape keeping our less-than-legal business close to our chest, but now, this was our hiding place—the little village of Great Tenor.

There was something about it that felt eerily familiar.

“How do you know?” I looked him up and down. “The man was old, Father.”

“A shot to the head is not a symptom of old age, Laney.” He snapped. “This is serious.”

It was murder? My thoughts stuttered. “Oh...Well, I-”

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“No, not ‘oh well’!”

This was all coming out wrong. It just didn’t make sense. “I didn’t mea-”

“Keep your voice down.” I am. “This is a declaration of war. Find me the culprit with whatever cyber security bullshit you tout so often. Trust no one.”

“Do you think it’s...?”

“No.”

He said firm. “They are dead. All of them. I can prove it.”

I couldn’t understand his certainty, but he was already walking away in a slow commanding stride before I could ask. I rolled my eyes in frustration. It was a routine that we excelled at. I talked, he didn’t listen. He spoke, and I must obey. A cat-and-mouse game like that wasn’t rewarded by a father-daughter hug afterwards, regardless of how much I wished it was.

He beckoned me with two fingers over his shoulders.

So, I followed his back. Perusing each maroon painted wall adorned with a vast collection of family portraits and looted artworks as I went. Since the Ravencroft-Karstein split, the fissure, when we were evicted to London, the confines of these walls had been stifling with unresolved drama. What had been an untouched relic now had footmen scurrying along its many corridors—the speed of their movements partly out of duty but primarily out of fear. Father already ruled with an iron fist.

Amidst that chaos, it was difficult to find peace and even more challenging to find friends. The added isolation of this Hertfordshire village depleted me. Any hope that I'd find somebody like Tilly found her husband vanished by the day.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked. Nothing but forest hugged the property. It hummed with a haunted knowing. The canopy of trees shrouded it in complete darkness. I noticed the shift even with my eyes shut. We walked into its embrace, and with a breath of fresh air, it suddenly hit me.

I'll never see my grandfather again.

He was dead. At the hand of a gun.

In this life, we were taught to anticipate the loss, but you can never quite predict the grief.

"You'll see," was all he said.

As the foliage thickened, we slowed our pace. I restrained a sob that threatened to erupt between clambered breaths. Edward Ravencroft was not a good man. He never claimed to be. He made his mistakes and certainly didn't deserve my tears. Still, the overwhelming sense of absence filled my bones, my grip on the present moment slipping. I hoped he didn't feel that emptiness as he passed.

"How was he found?" And I didn't mean with a hole in his head. "Was he alone?"

He didn't say anything, he just walked to a large dark square imprinted into the grass clearing outlined with blackened brick. It took a minute to gather that it wasn't grass I was walking on, but gravel intertwined with weeds.

A branch snapped below my feet, taking me from my thoughts. Light filtered back

into my vision as we reached a clearing.

“You’re wondering why we had to move away from London?” He shrugged, nonchalant, but there was something unkempt in his posture, unresolved as he pointed at the tarnished ground. “This is what happens in war, Laney. Do not underestimate the brutality of it.”

Great Tenor. It suddenly occurred to me. The place of union, but also...“The fire was here.”

...the site of the Karstein massacre.

The bird song echoed rather than flowed. The wind stilled. My heart raced. I can’t be here.

I jumped off the blackened gravel onto a patch of untainted grass and whipped around to return to the house, but Father wrapped a hand around my waist, pulling my back to his front. “This isn’t a fairytale, Sunshine. Not like in your books.”

I shook my head. “War won’t fix this.”

“Diplomacy won’t either. That broke down the second they murdered my father. But this place could protect us.”

“It doesn’t have to—”

“It does.” He pointed toward the scorched rock. “No one made it out of this house. A whole bloodline. Gone. There are no winners in this world, just survivors. Land. On. Top.”

This wasn’t a battle I could win. Not with him. I had to concede. “Yes, Sir.”

Most likely, I wouldn't land on top, but maybe I could not get crushed at the bottom of the pile.



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I owed Grandad a resolution that he never seemed to find in life. And it started with this place, with this family name and the union. If I could find the cause for the fissure, I could heal his posthumous heart. I had to beat Father's quest for violent revenge and show him that Grandad could have a dignified remembrance without spilt blood.

I need my laptop.

Grandad gave me my first laptop when I started school. It was my refuge when my surrounding world wanted me gone. I could live an alternative life online and find a purpose beyond staring out windows I couldn't jump from.

I stepped out beyond the cover of the trees onto the pavement in front of the soldier's quarters. More men than I'd ever seen before in one place milled around the tarmac beside the barrack block.

The barracks, built behind the grand manor house during the Union, have sat hauntingly empty ever since. They housed the cadets, foot soldiers, and our artillery storage and security offices. That was where my laptop was.

With my head down, I entered the building. I nodded at the men guarding the door, avoiding their gaze. They returned a slight look of sullen pity. I hated it. Neenan caught sight of me as I turned midway through an eye roll. I picked up my pace.

"Laney!" Neenan shouted after me, "Laney, stop!"

I turned and held a pointed finger to his chest. "Do not ask me if I'm okay. I can't

take it.”

The moment of silence confirmed that was what he was going to say.

I continued walking.

I didn’t want to talk about it unless it was three drinks deep with my cousin, Tilly. She’s coming this week, but I couldn’t feel the full brunt of the excitement that I usually would.

Turning the corner to where my bedroom was, I saw a figure standing there.

Beautiful.

She stood outside my bedroom door, looking up at a picture of the family. At the time of the image, I was at St James’s. Miserable. The attempt at a smile marred my face, regardless. After years of begging, I couldn’t admit defeat to my father.

Was she here for me?

I approached her slowly, not startling her. “I swear, I learnt how to smile since that picture was taken,” I chuckled under my breath.

She turned, and my laugh got caught in my throat. I smiled confused, yet suddenly relaxed.

She was the girl. The girl was she.

It took effort to hold my jaw in place. “Oh-I-uhh-Hello!”

She gave me a sceptical look, her skin as pale as I remembered. “Hi,” she replied,

reserved.

Neenan took that moment to stomp down the hallway. “Laney are you o-” He stopped behind me, taking note of the girl before me. “Oh Kenna, nice to see you found your way.”

Kenna.

“You know each other?” I looked between the two. They both looked at me, heads tilted.

“Only briefly, I gave her a tour earlier. Your father hired Kenna as part of the heightened security measures. A junior enforcer. She’ll be staying in this room.” He pointed to the room beside mine and shrugged. “Away from the boys, you know.”

“Father? You’re Laney.” Kenna spoke in a soothing cadence, shoulders pushed back.

I tried to mimic her stance, but I could only hide a shy smile as I brushed my hair behind my shoulders. I wasn’t as suave as her. All I could do was nod.

Neenan inched closer to us as if to get between us.

“Goodnight, Neenan,” I said and rested a hand on Kenna’s arm. I guided her into my room, paying the guard no mind, not when she was in my vision. “I’m so glad you are here.” I breathed the words out in a similar way one would release a sigh of relief.

She followed me, closed the door with a stilted smile, and sat on the edge of the bed. “I would’ve preferred different circumstances.”

“Yeah,” I considered, “But still.” A sudden giddiness filled me. It was bizarre that the figment of my endless daydream sat politely on my bed. It wasn’t with the ease that

I'd hoped though. I shivered when I sat beside her.

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The weight of the day, of my loss sat heavy on my chest.

Before I could succumb to my grief, the sting of tears threatening to spill already, I had to know if it was really her. “This is going to sound unbelievable, and I-I don’t quite know how to start this.” I took her hand when I spoke. I was shy, as lonely people often were, but her presence lent me an unexpected eloquence, even boldness. To my surprise, she pressed into my hand and laid hers over it. Her eyes beamed at me as she smiled again and blushed. It spurred me on. “...I know you. At St. James's Academy in Islington. Eight years ago.” I didn’t ask her in the end. I was overcome with the same certainty with which I would say that the breeze ruffled leaves.

“No,” Kenna said simply, and a boulder fell on my chest, knocking all the air out of my lungs. Her glossy brown hair captivated me into a brief stupor as I reclaimed my breath. “I was homeschooled.”

My face dropped. This can’t be happening. After all this time. Now that she sat right in front of me. I couldn’t be wrong.

“No,” I said. “No, no...I’m sure it was you.” I am not crazy.

With her head tilted, she leaned her face in closer. “Couldn’t be, Miss Laney.” She took one of my hands into her lap. “I’d remember a pretty face like yours.”

I was stunned into silence and stared straight ahead avoiding her.

“My deepest condolences for the passing of your grandfather. His absence is felt in the community,” Kenna brought our clasped hands to place them over her heart.

Community?

I retracted my hand. Confusion clouded my head as my eyes closed. “No,” I whispered, “No.” It was another loss. Keep it together until Tilly gets here, keep it together until Tilly gets here, she’ll tell you what to do.

Kenna took my muttering as confirmation of my grief, but she didn’t move to comfort me like she had before. No hand was resting on my back nor were there any rhythmic thumb caresses.

Slowly, she retreated from the room. If you need me, I’ll be next door. I heard her mumble, but it didn’t register because it didn’t feel genuine. When she closed the door, she left me in the déjà vu-stricken confines of crushing solitude. I memorised each of her eyelashes each time she passed me in the school corridor. The warmth of her skin. The shine of her hair.

I remember her, I’m sure of it, and I wasn’t wrong.

When I heard her door click shut, I scrambled for my yearbook hidden behind the vanity and desperately flicked through the pages. I found myself easily, under a fake name, but no trace of her. I looked up old group emails and messages. Class registers. Pictures from sports days. No evidence. Kenna, Kenna, Kenna. I scoured the internet. Nothing. Not even amongst the endless galleries of images that mums seemed to harbour on Facebook.

How strange.

My vision wavered as I stared at my laptop, a migraine beating a rhythm into the left side of my skull. The steady thump was a red signal to close the laptop and sleep.

Dread filled me. Was Father right?

No.

I wasn't seeing things.

It would be agony if she wasn't real. My mind tentative for a push down, the spiral of thoughts and feelings and considerations of fallacy and reality, I couldn't decide what was right. Grandfather was still here, and Kenna was the mystery girl. No doubt about it. Or was there?

Somewhere in the cloud of confusion and incorrectness of it all was the profound feeling of grief that underpinned it all, and with it, a pervading sense of injustice for grandfather.

This was his retirement, death wasn't meant to touch him, and conflict wasn't going to avenge him either.

Despite the taxing day, sleep was difficult. I need medication.

As I stepped out of my room to go to the bathroom medicine cabinet, a shift in the air drew my attention away from it. To my left, I narrowed my eyes to see a figure drowned in oversized black clothing. Flicks of hair waved in the breeze as they strode to the backdoor. My tired eyes betrayed me; within a blink, they were gone.

Father was right. Hallucinations.

The pill was a bitter one to swallow.

Chapter 2

KENNA

She stood at the top of the staircase.

Laney was different from how I remembered her. The image of the sad girl had been replaced by a vulnerable kind of ferocity and alive. Between stolen glances and swift head turns at St James's, I formed an attachment that I'd hoped would cease as soon as I saw her again.

But it was not budging.



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God, it was annoying. She stuck in my mind as ivy clung to an old brick house, and as much as I wanted to tear it down, it had become part of the facade—a natural protective barrier of luscious softness that warmed the coldness of my stoned exterior. My dad taught me attachments ruined things, yet the leafy vines wrapped around my heart. I dared not rip them from my walls. What if I lost my sparkle?

“Welcome to your first day,” she said as I reached her, the tear stains from last night covered by a light sheen of powder. “This way.”

I followed her deeper into the house, its shadowy alcoves teeming with unspoken whispers that made me look over my shoulder more than once. Its opulence obnoxious. “I hope you found rest in your sleep last night.”

Distance hadn’t solved my predicament. Maybe proximity would. I had to get closer for the vines to unravel, I was sure of it, so here I was. My foot in the door was a junior enforcer.

“Somewhat.” She replied, stiffly. “What is your role here anyway?” Her tone wasn’t unkind, but less than welcoming as she opened a large wooden door into an office adorned with familiar family portraits and landscape paintings.

“I’ve been assigned to assist with the recent...disturbances to the syndicate.”

Laney winced, and her eyes turned to meet mine, red, in either anger or grief, I wasn’t sure. “Disturbances?” She spat. “You mean the death of my grandfather?”

“He had only disappeared when I was recruited but, yes.” I breathed. When I reached

out a hand to comfort her, she pulled away and sat behind the desk in the room, far away from me.

I dropped down in a chair opposite to her, legs crossed.

She stared me down, teary eyed but holding firm eye contact, assessing. “And you think you can help?”

I straightened my back. “I know I can.”

Before she could respond, the door opened behind me. I didn’t turn but I heard the sound of heavy boots approaching me, and then a tall man came into view, probably in his mid-forties but with gelled, slick back hair.

“Forrester,” Laney greeted him.

I stood to rival his height and extended my hand. “Kenna Whether, Sir.”

He eyed my hand suspiciously and turned to Laney.

“Kenna will be joining us as an enforcer,” she said. So, she already knew about me. I didn’t let her admission show in my posture as I faced off with this man.

Forrester looked me up and down in return. He was imposing, and wore a distressed, navy-blue jacket that looked like he had owned it his entire career.

I stood perfectly still, feet shoulder length apart, straight back and my hand remaining outstretched.

“Charming,” he conceded, taking my hand into a tight grip.

I could only lift an eyebrow as a response.

“Right,” Laney nodded, “Please, allow Kenna to accompany you on your rounds of the estate and pinpoint the areas she will be working in.”

“Of course,” Forrester pointed a guiding hand toward the door. “Follow me.”

I stepped out first, walking into the darkened hallway.

“I’ll be in my office,” Laney said from a distance now. Office? I wondered what position she held in the structure of the Ravencroft Estate. It seemed she was well respected, but she wouldn’t have handed me off to this man if she were on the enforcement side.

He led me down the stairs and soon the carpeted floors were replaced by concrete as we descended to the lower levels of the house at the back. The deeper we got into the back corners of this manor, the more I thought that the grandeur of the place would end. But it didn’t. Despite the dampness, each door handle was polished gold.

“So, you are the new recruit?” He asked.

The uncertainty in his voice pinched at my confidence. If I was to succeed in this role, I needed him to trust me and so far, I only saw doubt in his eyes. “I prefer asset,” I said.

He scoffed. “We’ll see yet.” We stopped in front of an engraved wood door, and Forrester stood to the left of it, paused. “Inside,” he demanded.

Pushing the door open, I wasn’t expecting the fluorescent light that flooded the room in a cold glow. Inside, the maroon painted walls were covered in blueprints of the property and maps of Great Tenor and London. Photographs and files were scattered

on a large table in the middle, marked with red and black ink.

“This is your war room,” I deduced, my voice low.

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A heavy thump announced the closure of the door. Forrester came beside me and leaned on the expansive table. "Correct. As we moved our operations underground, this became our hub for planning, strategy and execution." He pointed toward the back wall that was covered by various sized screens showing CCTV streams and apparent drone footage. "Every plan must be seen until completion, I'm sure you understand the delicacy of it all."

I tried to keep my eyes focused on him, but they desperately wished to take in every corner of the room. "I understand."

"Good." He pushed himself off the table and sat in a chair in front of the screen wall. Silently, he scrutinised me as I sat beside him. "As an enforcer, you are trusted to maintain order, conceal the Ravencroft operations and perform complex security measures. This isn't simply a game of muscle, it is a tightrope of strategic offences and subtle surveillance."

Over the next hour, the history of the Ravencroft Estate was laid out. Their debts, disputes and alliances were all interlinked in the security protocols and operations of the current syndicate. He passed me files to examine to identify the weak spots of the operations and predict their outcomes.

In those moments, I had to actively slow my breathing. My family prioritised the art of tactical violence ahead of literacy in my home education. Even at twenty four, reading was difficult. I scoured the sentences for words I recognised and filled in the rest with context clues, concocting a meticulous chronology of my action plan for the operation. I hoped Forrester didn't sense my hesitation. If he did, he didn't show it, but something in his demeanour told me that this wasn't a man you could easily read.

“Place your trust in me.” I inched closer to him, imploring these words. “Physical manpower is only effective when integrated with an extensive digital tracking system. Without the necessary protocols on hard drive storage and surveillance geo-tracking, offences are at risk.”

He leaned back in his seat. “Ah, that’s right, you might be useful after all.”

“Told you,” I said in calculated charm. “I’m an asset.”

The laugh that I’d expected to hear didn’t come. Instead, a serious expression came to his features. “Don’t get ahead of yourself, young lady. Loyalty is paramount. You’ve got to earn your place here, trust isn’t freely given.”

I blinked slowly. “I’ve got this.”

“You’ll be integrated gradually. Tomorrow, you start with the new cadets at base training. Don’t be late.”

When I left the war room, my mind was filled with layers of information that lacked the glue to understand them. The intrigue of this place magnified the web of secrets it tried to hide. Somewhere in this estate lay the answer to my questions, but they are questions that haven’t fully formed yet.

The next morning, I joined the cadets in initiation. The training wing was by the barracks at the back of the house, away from the winding corridors and aged artwork. Instead, we were immersed in chipped white brick walls and a cold floor padded with blue mats.

After attending training for four days, they had taught me nothing but how to land a right hook. At least, the cadets had been more useful though. Often, they discussed the circumstances leading to Edward's demise. Rumours ran around the foot soldiers,

each theory more elaborate than the last. Some said Edward's backroom gambling went sour. Others blamed a territorial dispute, few people loved having made men as neighbours. A few dared to whisper about a Karstein plot. Not many people talked about the Karsteins since the fissure, even among the wider underworld communities, people who did routinely shared the fate of poor Eddy.

But more importantly than that, the cadets were quick to reveal that Laney worked in security. Finally, something useful.

A groan rumbled deep in my throat when I reached the door to the drill room. Grant O'Doherty stood at the front of the room, a stopwatch in hand. His large stature loomed over the group with his bulging muscles and tight t-shirts, he didn't leave much up to the imagination. I had no patience to be in a room with a man that high on the scent of his own sweat, nor did I have the energy to interact with the boys, yes boys, that filled the lower ranks of the Ravenscraft estate's reserve.

"Miss Whether you're late." Grant pointed toward the open door leading to the paved driveway that stretched to the front gates in the far distance. "Two miles. To the gates and back."

Walking toward the exit, I tried my hardest to keep my eyes from rolling. "Jesus, just give me a laptop already," I muttered under my breath, though perhaps not as softly as I had thought. "Put me in active duty."

"You want four or something?" Grant came in close to my side, as I walked slowly. At the proximity I could see the black ink that wrapped around his arm and twisted to hide below his shirt. "GO!"

The urge to scream back at him was immense. I was meant to be a junior enforcer, my physical fitness had nothing to do with my performance in strategy. All this base training did was withhold and reroute me from doing my job. In a time of war, time

was of the essence. Guess they never told the Ravencrofts that. Perhaps, they grew too comfortable in this gold-plated horror house.

My feet stomped on the floor as my thoughts ran rampant. I'd had enough of this rat race. At least put me behind a screen watching the breeze hit the trees on the heaps of CCTV that littered the grounds. But no, had me run.

On the bright side, it got me away from the other cadets. Because I was the only girl starting eyes seemed to find me in a room more readily than blonde boy #4. I hated it. The attention, the assumptions and the look of opportunity that gleamed in the eyes of some of these boys. Vile. Another day to be grateful that I liked girls instead.

Breaking into a swift jog when my feet hit the pavement of the circular driveway in front of the mansion, I headed in the direction of the front gates. As I did, a man in a black SUV with the door open and cigarette alight, his predatory eyes trained on me.

Forrester Waite. Forty-five. Enforcer. Jacked. The cadets told me about him, saying that he was some top dog, but honestly, he likely got hard at girls' tears. His power was a rouse.

I paid him no mind as I continued running past him but the path of his eyes on my body burned into my skin. Gross. Get to the treeline, just get to that treeline.

Once I felt the protection of the forest on either side of me, I picked up my pace. The driveway wound into a single-track road hugged by luscious green trees. It was still morning, and the air was light with a fresh breeze shuffling the leaves. It was finally peaceful.

My legs begin to ache halfway to the gate. I volunteered for this job to help my family. Truly, I couldn't afford the distraction. If they knew I was here to get under Laney Ravencroft they'd hand in my two weeks before I could say a single word.



This is so wrong.

The Ravencroft Estate was haunting. It gave off the aura of a coveted place, harbouring secrets that have aged into the landscape, but despite its history, it felt familiar. The whispers and rumours echoed along hallways decorated with family heirlooms and commissioned artworks, they sang a familiar tune. I just needed to untangle it to understand. Beneath the grandeur hide the strict regimen that the people here followed. The outward wealth was a fallacy for inner turmoil bursting to be revealed but remained captured by the old brick walls. It was nice to step away from it for a while.

Reaching the gate, I allowed myself a brief moment to rest. Weaving my arms through the metal bars to relax my back onto it and tilting my head back with closed eyes, I breathed deeply. A sound of mechanical movement peeled my eyes open as I looked straight into the lens of a CCTV camera. Goddammit. Peace was a fallacy, too. This nature was not untouched.

I ran into the forest for a moment, seeking some reprieve from watchful lenses between the thicket bushes and into the trees. It was here that the pungent smell hit my senses. A musk of iron and heated sweat mixed with decaying fruits. Following the scent deeper into the brush, it didn't take me long to find the cause of it.

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On the ground sat half a pomegranate fruit that looked as if it had been burned, its seeds scattered in a jagged line toward the next set of trees.

Taking another step, I gagged.

A pale hand stretched from beneath a pile of leaves, clutching the other half of that charred pomegranate. As my darkened eyes followed from the fingers to the wrist to the arm, a body came into view.

A girl with ginger hair, makeup freshly done and in a sundress.

Except the dress was stained, liquid oozes out of the gouged hole of her chest with pomegranate juice.

No, not with juice, with blood. Oxygenated blood that was a pale crimson. Fresh and new.

Jesus Christ.

### Chapter 3

LANEY

The first thing I looked for when I started my day was her. There's something uncanny in her refrain. Each time I caught a glimpse, I was transported back to my secondary school self, and that fearful intrigue in me was ablaze again. If she wasn't the girl I swore I saw at school, she was my dream girl.

It was either that or I was just excited to have another woman at the estate. Tilly was coming today, or at least I hoped so. She was often late. Being both newlywed and a new mother left her with little time for friends.

It was only me here. Well, now it's me and Kenna. Mafia women usually get married just before their eighteenth birthday; they don't stay at home long. Father even set me up once, but it didn't work out.

Tilly had a husband, I had her. She turned nineteen last week. The kitchen prepared a red velvet cake for tonight.

Father and I sat on a balcony overlooking the front driveway of the manor house, cappuccinos in hand—mine with chocolate sprinkles on top, his without. It became our new routine as we adjusted to the new house.

“I hope you have updated the server verification system to be processed through a VPN in the Cayman Islands and disguised the extended geo-tracking into the wider Great Tenor area to comply with new public privacy laws.” My father spoke with no glamour. Believe it or not, those are the first words he has spoken to me today. I stopped expecting a ‘good morning’ greeting when I hit puberty.

“Yup, and I installed a facial recognition system in the cameras at each estate entrance, including the West porch entryway and gates. The new hires already had their likeness scanned on intake.”

His eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Great. And the April hard driv-?”

“Already encrypted and in the Cave.”

“Good.” He nodded sharply. A copy of *Troilus and Cressida* lay on the table between us. Father kept up with my English teachings through Shakespeare's plays. I only

really enjoyed the romantic ones, even with a tragic ending. “How far did you get?”

“I just reached Act three this morning.”

“Ah, Cressida’s exchange. It’s a terrible shame that war necessitates familial sacrifice. Know, Sunshine, that I would never trade you.”

“I know, Father.” You would rather use me. “But it seems like hearts will break regardless. I don’t want Grandad’s death to be just a piece in a larger war. I don’t even want the conflict. It always ends in tragedy.”

“It’ll be worth it.” He said. “We’ll get our revenge, Laney. Your grandfather’s death will not be in vain.”

Hope of revenge shall hide our inward woe. “That won’t make us heal faster! It’ll just make the cuts deeper. Doesn’t it hurt enough?”

He didn’t reply. It always seemed that violence and pain was something inevitable in his mind. That it simply came with the mafia territory. I never really understood why resolutions of conflict in this world had to be signed in blood rather than handwritten signatures.

“His funeral will be in four weeks.”

“Okay.” I said, nodding, but the bounce of my knee drilled a rhythm into the ground below my feet. There was something eery about this place. Its history concealed under the thick foliage of intertwining ivy vines, but while it might be covered, it wasn’t concluded.

A heavy hand fell on my knee and froze me in place. “You know you are safe here, Laney.”

“I felt safe in London.”

“To land on top, we must hide and become prepared to fight. This is a temporary base to facilitate that.”

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“But what if...”

“No one knows we are here. Anonymity is the safest place of them all. Trust me, the conflict will be fought far away from you and then, you can return to your merry London life.”

I withheld a huff as I let our conversation descend into a reflective silence. We both looked ahead at the expansive forest that lined the property. The treeline was high to conceal our whereabouts and the scale of our operations here. On the rooftops, snipers were poised to anticipate the worst, and so were the multiple heavily armed bodyguards Father had recruited to follow his every move. Breakfast was their fifteen-minute break, I guess.

The Union may have perished in the fissure, crippling our operations with the absence of lucrative revenue from Karstein drugs and arms, but the Ravencroft Estate remained powerful. Our money was stamped and disturbed amongst the seediest of London pubs, clubs and casinos. To protect our assets and hide our identity during our relocation to this Hertfordshire village, the Great Tenor levy had been imposed, the tax promised protection from any threats our presence may incur.

God forbid the violence found us here.

My eyes trained on Kenna. Her chest heaved as she came up to the front steps of the estate, an entrance she was not supposed to use, and evaded my sightline. The next thing we could hear was a banging on the door. Sir Waite was stationed at the front of the house, a bold move for the new girl—until I listened to her pleading.

“A body...blood everywhere...” She managed to say between huffs, “God, there was so much blood. Oh my god...” It’s difficult to piece together her exact words, but I sat up to hear better anyway.

My father was already out of his chair, leaning too far over the balcony.

Kenna kept rattling off details to the stern man. In between the loud thumps of my escalated heartbeat, I caught snippets of her words, “...laid between leaves...first, fruit juice...then...hole...” She stabbed her finger to her chest, demonstrating. “And her hair...”

“Her?” Forrester interrupted.

“...it was red.”

My heart stalled and skipped a beat.

?

“Laney!”

It was like the last week hadn’t happened and I was stuck in a loop. Once again Neenan chased after me as I ran from him in tears. But this time I ran toward the barrack’s med bay instead of hiding myself.

“I want to see her!” I screamed, throat hoarse. By the fourth corridor that led to rooms I didn’t recognise, I grew frustrated as Neenan strayed uselessly behind me. “Take me to her, please, please.”

Stopping abruptly, I swung round clawing at his chest. “Let me see her. I want to see her.”

He opened his mouth, but it wasn't his voice that spoke the next words.

"That's not a good idea." Grant's ashen face rounded a corner.

I must be close.

Tears welled. "She was my family first!"

Neenan stood before me avoiding my eyes, while Grant shifted his weight from foot to foot as he watched me with caution. "Please," I whispered.

With a tight smile, Grant stepped forward. "I can't let you see her." He said as he lifted a hand to halt my impending words. "Her injuries are...just... remember Tilly as the bright girl that she was, and not..."

At his proximity, I could see the goosebumps rise on his brown skin. Whatever he saw it was chilling. I grimaced. Sometimes saying less created the darker image in my mind. Remember my friend, he was saying, and ...not her buckled body.

I wanted to run to her, if only to get mental picture out of my head. Grant's sudden appearance meant that she was near. I could find her, I knew it, but both men packed enough muscle between them to restrain me with ease.

I exhaled heavily. "Who did this?"

"The culprit is unknown, but I assure you we will find him."

"Like you found my grandfather's killer?" I replied. My hope had been dwindling by the day. It was a known fact that crimes not solved within the first forty-eight hours were most likely to go cold.



That wouldn't be our legacy. It couldn't be.

I shook my head and nodded and then, glanced up at Neenan, his saddened expression mirroring a more muted version of mine. "Why," I stumbled. "Why her?" Tears began to burn their path down my cheeks. "Not her. Never her."

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“I don’t know, Laney.”

She had no part in this operation, she chose to be a homemaker, a mother and wife. A soft home for her family to grow, a haven from the taint of bloodshed. Wasn’t it inscribed in the mafia oath that women and innocents wouldn’t be harmed? She was meant to be safe.

“Let me,” I stood taller, confident. “Let me, at least, say goodbye...please.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t let you do that.” Grant said, and with a weak smile on his lips stepped backward in the direction he came from.

“Please.” I halfway whined, tears dripping on the concrete.

He simply shook his head and left me there.

My tightened posture deflated, and I bent through my knees to fall to the floor. But before I hit the floor, a hand grabbed my arm. The grip was softer than I would expect from either man. I turned sharply to look at who was holding me, and I paused. Suddenly, the hand on my arm felt warm, and I felt myself relax a little, a kind reprieve from the tension of this week.

“Laney,” she said softly, herself appearing shaken as her voice cracked. “I heard she was your friend.”

God swallow me whole.

Without warning, I folded my arms around Kenna's shoulders, seeking comfort. I nestled in further, placing my face neatly into the curve where her neck and shoulder met. The smell of old fruit juice clung to her. She might not remember me, but I know her, and I took advantage of it. I'm not strong enough to jog her memory—not even strong enough to correct her.

Tilly Morden was not only my dearest family, but also my closest family outside Grandfather. My world was devoid of colour without them.

My heartbeat erratically and for a moment, I didn't even feel Kenna's arms circle around my waist, but when it finally registered, I shivered and cried harder.

"I'm sorry," I retracted, dropped my arms and faced in the direction of my bedroom. Leading a sheltered life meant that I didn't know intimacy like most my age, and while Kenna didn't feel foreign to me, her touch did. Isolation was the only thing I knew to be safe.

I sniffled and started on the path back to solitude. Everyone was leaving me. I couldn't help but feel like it was personal.

"Please don't," she said, and I paused. "I don't want to be alone."

She came to stand beside me, and we walked back into the main house together. Words were hard to find. There was so much to be said in moments like these but also nothing at all. For now, I wanted to just feel. I wasn't sure there was a guidebook on losing your cousin and grandfather within a week anyway.

It wasn't okay. It wasn't right. It just was, and I had no control over any of it. What if tomorrow another body shows up? This couldn't become a routine. But there were holes in the story that were yet to be filled that I needed to reclaim even an inch of sanity. "You found her, right?"

“Yeah,” Kenna slowly nodded. “I can’t unsee it. She was perfectly still, laying among the leaves. Beautiful even.”

“Vibrant hair, piercing blue eyes.” I smiled.

When we got to my bedroom door, she opened it for me. “But she was pale and...” Her face soured, “...leaking.”

A shudder racked my body.

“It was horrific.” I wanted her to stop and go on at the same time. My poor friend. I need you.

“You shouldn’t have seen that through the gates, whoever brought her here to display is sickening.”

Her eyebrows scrunched. “Through the gates? No, Laney, she was inside the estate.”

“Inside?”

“About five feet from the fencing beyond the treeline, it was loo-”

Tears ceased as I processed this confusing information. It made no sense. I had motion capture-triggered alerts set up to notify me any time there was activity by the fencing. “Inside the gates.” Oh my god. I ran from my room to the office upstairs.

Kenna walked into the office moments after I did and sat to watch my every move, seemingly transfixed and curious. She said nothing.

“No one used those gates for days; we’re on lockdown.” I explained, turning on the PC. In moments, I disabled the locks on the computer and decrypted the files that

hold the security footage.

Neenan came to the door after I found the correct tapes. He didn't seem to bat an eye at the fact that Kenna was sitting there, and I pleaded with him to come right up to me to look at the screen. Reaching over my shoulder, he changed the playback speed to double time. And as I thought, the gates didn't move.

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Grant soon joined us and looked over my shoulder as I played and replayed the tapes. The only movements in the last three days were a black truck carrying in the new cadets, Kenna running to the gate each morning, and hourly guard checks, but none ventured into the brush.

Except one girl. In tight spandex. This morning.

Neenan and I looked up at Kenna at the same time.

“How fresh was the blood found on Tilly?” Neenan approached Kenna, towering over her form as she was seated.

“Uhh, her blood was mixed with fruit juice, but the body couldn’t have been there more than twenty-four hours.” I assessed her. Her shoulders were pushed back, her leather jacket sat atop her relaxed form. Eyes sympathetic. Breaths measured. She was the picture of confidence, but the elevated pitch of her voice as she ran to the door this morning was etched in my mind. “Her body was cooling but not all the way cold yet.”

There wasn’t enough time. Not a speck of blood was on her—no fruit juice.

Grant reached over me to pause the footage. “There.” He rested a finger on the screen. Without lifting his gaze from the screen, he asked, “Was she on the Eastern or Western side of the road?”

“East.” Kenna said.

“Five feet from the fence.” I whispered.

He toggled the arrow buttons skipping a second ahead and a second back. It wasn’t until the fourth comparison that I spotted it. The dark blur. One second it was there and the next second it was gone. A jump cut.

“Enhance it.”

My eyes fell to read the timestamp. 2:34 AM.

The entrance log was verified, and other camera angles confirmed what I feared.

The gates hadn’t moved.

## Chapter 4

KENNA

Ididn’t do it.

Eyes bored into my back when I walked into training the following morning. And it was not because I was five minutes early. Laney and Neenan hadn’t accused me of anything last night, but I could see the questions form in their eyes. In silence, they escorted me to my bedroom, each step heavier than the last as they walked me to my coffin, poised to dig my grave any time afterward.

But no one came for me.

No one shanked me in the line for breakfast. Traitor wasn’t screamed in my face, nor a gun drawn. Only whispers permeated the air. And when I caught Grant’s gaze, it was downright lethal, but, like my Mamma always told me, trust can’t be gained

through words but through actions.

I wouldn't plead my innocence, I'd show it

So, when Grant announced the topic of training, I stood calm and collected.

“A special guest joins us today to show you the tactical superiority of knife wielding skills in hand-to-hand combat.”

I inwardly groaned. Knives were slow in defensive scenarios, inefficient, not to mention messy, so I preferred guns to blades. There was no crime scene cleaner on the battlefield, nor a launderette that would take bloodied leather as I've come to know.

Conflict was the core of my upbringing. Dad taught me how to combat it while Mama dispensed it. Yet, despite the rough hands my brothers and I were dealt with, our family was a unit, which made this training session child's play.

The slam of a door snapped me out of my thoughts. Preceding the noise was a woman in a forest green sports bra and matching leggings. Her dirty blonde hair was captured in a high ponytail that swayed as she walked towards the front of the room. My eyes were transfixed on her body.

“Leading the session is Miss Laney.” God, help me. Grant commanded the room, Laney appeared comfortable beside him, if a little nervous as she looked around the stone walls of the basement training room. “While unorthodox for the person you're paid to protect to teach you defence skills, she is the best on the estate.”

A round of concealed giggles filled the room as the boys looked Laney up and down, I pushed my shoulders back in something like deviance, but Laney didn't, she cowered. I know I checked her out all the same but not to demean, only to admire!



And maybe to indulge. But these boys meant nothing other than offence by their continued scoffs and whispers.

Grant retrieved a gun from his pocket and fired it at the target on the west wall, causing a loud echo to ricochet between each wall and painfully penetrate our ears. “You want her to cut your balls off with a pen knife? It wouldn’t be the first time, in fact, you should be warned, she’d enjoy it so shut the fuck up and listen closely.”

Enjoy it? She looked in my direction briefly then, though her expression gave nothing away.

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“You’ll be in pairs. Assigned. Not chosen. We’ll be simulating close proximity knife attacks, from both offensive and defensive scenarios.” Laney said before reading the paired surnames to begin the exercise. Before she reached the letter ‘W’, every single cadet had been selected. Sans me. “Whether, you’re with me.”

Lucky me.

?

After an hour, I was sure all this hand-to-hand combat would leave a lasting bruise. Laney had barely spoken a word to me as we moved from scenario to scenario. It wasn’t until scenario six, while she pinned my wrist down with her knee, seemingly pushing her entire body weight onto it, that I knew there was a reason.

I waited a moment before I flipped her over onto her back, boxing her in with my arms. That way, I had complete control of the situation. She bucked underneath me but didn’t gain any leeway as I held her firmly in position.

“Release me,” she grunted, again, shifting her hips.

Instead of offering a response, I slid my knee to slot between her legs.

She kept fighting as she brought a knife toward the side of my neck but never touched skin. “I command you—”

While the blade skirted an inch from touching flesh, our exposed midriffs were almost skin to skin. I could feel the heat of her body when she squirmed. This was

already a compromising position, but the next time she bucks, I'll knee her in the pussy. Only lightly, of course. Innocent. Indulgent.

“Get the fuck off me—”

“You can tell me, Laney.” I softened my gaze. “You can tell me anything.”

Then she bucked. “No!”

With a jerk, I lifted my knee so that it firmly pressed into her groin, stopping the squirming and silencing her plea. If she moved again, she'd be grinding on it. “Tell me what I did,” I said, moving my face closer to hers.

“Miss Whether, get the fuck off me rig-”

“Miss Whether? I thought you knew me better than that, princess.”

She threw me a desperate glare as she lifted her hips again, struggling to gain traction without causing friction. I knew she felt it because her cheeks turned a rosy hue, and her eyes briefly fell closed. Changing tact, she turned her efforts to my hands, caging her in on either side of her head. She managed to lift one of my fingers with a huff, but I still didn't budge.

“Why are you so good at training? I see the way you run, and you don't even break a sweat. You're not winded now so where did you learn that?” She breathed exasperatedly. Her chest brushed mine with each pant, but I remained still.

“Aw, you watch me run?”

She groaned.

“I’m glad you think so highly of me.” I smiled a wicked grin. It was so easy to taunt an already flustered girl but, as much as I loved to have a girl writhe underneath me, it wasn’t productive. I was no closer to finding out what her problem with me was so that I could fix it. “What do you think I think about you?”

“Well, considering the last two times we’ve met, I’ve been crying, I bet you think I’m kinda weak like the rest of these men,” Laney said with a snarl, exhaling deeply and moving up to lean her weight on her elbows. It brought our faces closer, yet she was looking anywhere but at me. If she did, she would’ve seen my shocked expression at the deprecation in her words. Mafia princess hasn’t been taught her value, huh.

“No,” I said, crystal clear, “That’s not what I think.” I tried, really tried, not to focus on the way that her breasts now pushed into my chest in that moment. But, God, I’m just a woman.

She lifted her chin as I moved to look down, hitting my face in the process. “Eyes up here, baby.” She said, almost in disgust.

My next exhale was haggard. Baby? I’d mutter a ‘sorry’ if I felt like I meant it, but truthfully the baby comment had me breathless.

It was a weakness.

She shouldn’t have that kind of power over me. I had her under me, wasn’t that enough? “You only let men look at you like that?” I spat. I shouldn’t have let my anger filter into my words, that act alone was an admission of weakness. My dad raised me better. Still, it worked a charm.

Her face fell in apparent outrage, and I had my answer. Well, well, well, chaste little Laney. I wiped the subtle grin off my face, relaxed my knee between her legs and lowered my voice. “Why are you mad at me?”

That was the crux of it. She was pissed off and I didn't know why. I understand her and Neenan's suspicion, but that usually elicited a far more covert and wary attitude. Anger? That wasn't a usual response.

"No men," she whispered under her breath. She shook her head repeatedly as if the motion would erase the thought. "No men."

If I was to clear a path in her scattered thoughts, I had to be direct. "Answer the question. Why are you really mad at me?"

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“I don’t understand you.” She replied.

“Laney.” I warned. “Why?”

She turned her head to the side and whispered. “You know why.”

“I don’t believe you believe it.”

She sighed and dropped down from her shoulders to lay flat on the floor. “You only wear black. You just arrived. You found her. You did i—”

I cocked my head, confused but unrelenting. “Just say it—”

“HEY,” Grant pierced our bubble, “Kenna, Laney, get up NOW!” His voice was coming closer now. Hands grabbed my waist to lift me off Laney, but I stepped from his grip.

I extended my hand to Laney, still on the floor.

After a moment's hesitation, she took it, but when she got to her feet, Grant immediately pulled her away, muttering to her, “The new recruits are not fresh bait for you to get distracted by pussy.”

That didn’t go how I intended. I only wanted her to concede that she knew I couldn’t have done it because it didn’t aligned with the image of me in her head. Not that I’d admit it, of course, but I had my reasons. I was barely here a week, if I wanted to stay longer, I needed the spotlight off me immediately.

After their exit, I needed fresh air in my lungs to replace what mixed with her breath. But before I could walk through the door to the garden it slammed shut. Beside it stood a young man in cadet uniform with hollowed cheeks and a light scruff on his chin. His face wasn't something I recognised.

I tilted my head forward, eyebrows high. My eyes flicked from his face to his hand on my bicep, prompting to let go soon or his face will be one with the floor. I didn't say that, though, I studied him instead.

"I did it." He said, smug and unprovoked, before throwing my arm out of his grip. It was as if he'd lifted a boulder from his shoulders and threw it over his head.

What did he mean he did it? Did what?

He hung his head. It wasn't an act of shame, though, it was in a thuggish kind of way that he probably thought made him look cool. When he lifted his head again, pride shone in his eyes, and he looked at me expectantly. But I didn't know what he was so fearsomely proud of. The only significant event that happened on the estate was Edward Ravencroft's funeral preparations and Tilly's mu— Oh no. It.

"You did that?" My eyes wide as I clamped a hand over my mouth. It couldn't go wrong so soon. "Here?"

Women and children must not be harmed. That was rule number one in the mafia. Everyone knew that.

When he nodded, I roughly fisted the front of his shirt to drag him out the door, away from echoing hallways and conspiratorial ears. I'd been away from my family for some time. I didn't know his face. This was new blood, and he looked pathetic. I got in his face before throwing him to the floor.

“Why the fuck would you tell me that?” I stared at him, daring him to move. I didn’t need an answer to my question, just recognition that he sealed his own fate.

He held two angled fingers to the side of his forehead and smirked. It took everything in me not to kick him in the stomach and embed a bullet in the centre of my boot mark. But I held back. This wasn’t a life that I deserved to take.

All I did was whistle.

The man laid in the grass leaning on his elbows, looking up at me.

I held his gaze, until a group of guards ran over and asked, “Cadets, what’s the matter here?”

The corner of the man’s lips lifted. I don’t know where he got the confidence from. He doesn’t think I’d do it. Then, he’s a fool.

“This is your guy.” I said, “He killed Tilly Morden.”

It was quieter than I imagined, I thought as this man was dragged away. Justice wasn’t always ceremonious, sometimes it was just clarity. That this problem had a solution. But with that realisation came a far graver one.

Being here wasn't only about proving myself anymore, it was a matter of survival.

## Chapter 5

### LANEY

Just after dusk, Neenan led me into the dark dungeon. He hadn’t told me where he was taking me, but I trusted him well enough to follow his lead. The day had been a



drag. Between the embarrassment of what happened in the training room and Grant's subsequent scolding of my 'unprofessionalism,' all I wanted was to read my book by the fireplace. Instead, at the end of a damp underground tunnel, I found my father waiting for me, looking at a steel-reinforced door with a sullen expression.

“Father?”

“Good of you to join us for the occasion,” he spoke in an intensity of which I was not accustomed and too tired to interrogate. His eyes glued hungrily at the door. “Open it.”

An enforcer that I hadn’t noticed in the corner stepped out from the shadows and spun the wheel to open the metal door.

I looked at Neenan, uncertain. He gave me a weak smile before turning on his heel and disappearing into the shadows.

The smell made me recoil, but the sight of the man filled my mouth with bile and every bit of fatigue evaporated.

Blood ran from his eyes, fingers were severed, and the missing chair leg was wedged in his forearm, the blood of the wound pooled underneath him. We’re not the first to step in it either.

The guard walked to the table beside the bloodied man, just out of reach his him, and deposited a glistening machete on it. The dim light caught on the edge of the blade so that it shined in his eyes. He flinched.

Behind me, my father nudged me further into the room.

“Have you been a good boy?” Father gave his head a rough shove, one that the man struggled to recoil from, but when he lifted his head, I was struck by recognition—not

by his face but by his uniform. Son of a bitch.

What internal crime could warrant such an extreme retaliation? Our vetting process was watertight, I personally oversaw it as such. Morale was good with the upcoming war, and while yes, tension was high this past week, it wasn't enough to incite violence. I knew that there hadn't been any reported physical altercations for months. No new people had arrived recently, the gates hadn't even moved.

The gates hadn't moved.

Father saw the moment it clicked in my head, a smirk spreading across his face.

Tears pricked my eyes, and I strained to not let a single one fall. "Which one?" I pushed out between shaky breaths.

"Straighten your back."

"Which." I grit. "One." The fact that there were two disgusted me. I kept my eyes on the disgraced guard.

Father said nothing.

Drawing in a large breath, I pushed down my tears and replaced it with anger.

"Who?" I seethed.

"Till-"

Before he could finish, I threw a leg into the man's stomach. He blubbered up a mixture of excess saliva and blood, but I hit him again. And again. And again, until Father pulled me off, grabbing my wrist.

“Enough of this nonsense, Laney.” He said. “End it. Avenge her.”

I looked him in the eye but spoke to my father, “Did he really do it?”

His hand pulled my arm back, and then I felt the cool of metal on my skin, the warmth of the leather handle. “Are you questioning me?”

I stayed silent. He was a cold leader, a colder father. To end a man’s life was easy for him. I preferred eternal suffering to death. More satisfying.

“Relax your shoulders. Feet apart.” He instructed close to my ear, while wrapping my fingers tightly on the leather and raising my arm to point at the man’s brow level. I caught his gaze as he scanned me, up and down. A smirk formed on his face. We couldn’t have that now, could we?

I drove the knife in his right shoulder. “That’s for Tilly.”

Then, I twisted the blade and pulled it out, aiming for his left shoulder. “That’s for her daughter.”

Next, I dug it into his legs.

Right. For her husband. Left. Her family.

I stepped closer to him, away from my father, and lowered the machete to be level with his dick and stabbed down hard. “That’s for the disrespect.” I spat with anger.

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I turned back to Father to catch a gleam to his eyes.

He's enjoying this. "Kill him, Sunshine."

The knife fell into his chest and clattered to the floor as I rushed out the room. A loud bang sounded. Certain death.

?

Only one person was on my mind as I ran from the dungeon. I threaded red stained hands through the knotted ends of my hair, tugging and pulling the fingers through it. My scalp flamed at the strain, but it was no match for the pain that leaked out my heart, like vital blood that left the man's chest before he could take his final breath. No, I took it from him.

Luckily, Neenan wasn't hard to find.

"Can we talk?" I said, wringing my hands together.

"Uhh, Laney, now is not a great time; we have a cadet missing and—"

"I know. I know. Please." I gave him my most enormous Bambi eyes.

If he was confused, he didn't show it, just guided me to take a seat. He sat across from me on the long tables of the mess hall, eyes intensely trained on me and my fidgeting hands, expectant. But I wasn't going to divulge anything unless he asked. I just needed his presence.

His shoulders fell. “What did you do?”

“What did I do? Why do you think I did something?”

“Because you’ve been evading me like the fucking plague for the last couple weeks, and now you just ran up to me frazzled and with a desperate look on your face. What happened?”

Tilly’s murderer came from within our ranks. Who knows which other cadets he tainted. What seeds he sowed? I looked around all the guards and soldiers and cadets that milled around the place, having their own thoughts, their conversations, conspiracies. They could all be infected.

The concern must be written across my face because Neenan grabbed my shaking hands, capturing them in his warmth. “Laney...”

I closed my eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Neenan pleaded.

My knee began bouncing causing the table to shake. I couldn’t think.

He stood, suddenly dropping my hands onto the table. It forced my eyes open to see Neenan round the table in record time. Grabbing my elbow, he took me to a backroom just inside the main house. It looked like it was once a utility room, now it held collapsed cardboard boxes, save for a rickety chair in the corner. That’s where Neenan forced my shoulder down to sit.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I replied too fast, avoiding his eyes as he knelt in front of me.

“Everything. It’s been a long week.”

“It’s been bloody chaos, I agree.” Neenan was the son of Forrester Waite, best friend to my grandfather, and we grew up beside each other. He was promoted to my personal security after my engagement fell through, not that I went out a lot. He was probably the only man that I trusted. I hoped he knew that.

I whispered, biting my cuticles, “I stabbed someone.”

“Stabbed?!” He all but shouted.

I shut my eyes and shoved his hands from my knees as I anticipated a dreaded knock at the door. “Shut the fuck up,” I whisper-yelled, “What if someone heard?”

He cocked his head. “You do remember that you’re a Ravencroft, right?”

“Yes, and?”

“Who? Who did you kill?”

“I said ‘stabbed’, not ‘killed’.”

“Is this ‘someone’ still breathing?”

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I swallowed the rock in my throat. “No...”

“Then, you killed someone.”

I took a deep breath. My heart rate skyrocketed as I am faced with the truth that I wished to evade if I just didn’t say it aloud. “I k—...” I stammered. “I kil—k-k—killed someone.”

God, it’s like it’s your first time.” He rolled his eyes.

All the air left my lungs as if he’d punched me in the stomach. “It is.” I hissed. Regret washed over me. I should’ve kept my mouth shut. Fucking men, no grace or fucks given.

His jaw dropped.

“And not only that, no, I killed him.”

He furrowed his eyebrows. “Who?”

“Him.” I pleaded with my eyes so that I didn’t have to say the words myself.

“Him?” He said, then immediately after, like a curtain falling it dawned on his face. The cadet wasn’t missing after all. “Oh.” He avoided my gaze.

“Father forced me. It’s not my fault. It’s not my fault. I swear” A pendulum swung in my head, swirling and mixing thoughts. None coherent. I tried my hardest not to get



tearful. And failed. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

It played in a loop, but for each iteration I became more lost in who it was meant for. Was it for the poor girl who will never see baby girl grow up? Or was it for the disgraced soldier who will never redeem the soul he blackened? Or was it for the girl who took a life for the momentary justice that faded as soon as it came?

I was no better than either of them. I murdered a murderer and lost myself in the process. The old Laney and post-kill Laney were inconsolable. I had to be different now, but how could I?

I tried to push through the pain. “What is his name?” I asked, but it came out choked as my throat constricted.

“Was.” Neenan replied, placing a hand on my knee again. “The sooner you understand that the sooner you can accept it. His name was Dylan. He wa—”

“Fuck.” Lifting my knees to the seat, I leaned my forehead onto them wishing beyond anything that I could just shrink and let out a groan.

“Did he really murder Tilly?”

I nodded, letting the tears drag paths down my cheeks.

“Shit.” Neenan moved so that his arms folded around me and with it, the painful edge of anxiety and grief washed away.

Moments went by like this, and I swear I almost fell asleep with my head on his shoulder. This shitshow week had been a mental load that I would very much like to bring to a cliff and throw over the edge. Or myself.

Eventually, I built up the energy to open my eyes, blinking against the sting of tears.

A voice rumbled below me. “You done drooling on me?”

I stuttered a laugh. “No, not yet,” and tugged him closer.

As time elapsed, I felt Neenan become increasingly antsy, jittery. The bounce in his knee jostled me gently to the point that I knew he was itching to say something. His bouncing escalated to rhythmic tapping of his finger on the wood of the bench that we shared.

“What?” I leaned back in annoyed question.

“What’s going on between you and Kenna?” He said, seeming suddenly shy in his approach.

“Nothing.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Sure.”

“No, really. The time you saw us together, she’d been there for two minutes. Tops.”

“And the grinding on the training mat?”

I shrugged. “A scenario.”

“A scenario,” he deadpanned.

“A scenario. Yes.”

“If you weren’t interrupted, would the scenario have led to sex?”

I gasped. “No! Get your head out the gutter, it wasn’t like that.”

“Sure, looked like it.”

“Well, looks are deceptive. It was hand-to-hand combat. You have to get close to your partner.”

“Close, yes. Pressed down under them, no. And hey, it’s okay, Kenna’s hot. A little reckless but you should have a little danger in your life, but don’t trust her.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’m the daughter of a mafia boss.” And I was smart.

“Yes, and? You’ve left the compound for like a total of four weeks of your life.”

“Wha—” I attempted to interrupt.

“Total.”

I grew angry and pushed Neenan away from me. “Okay, fine, I may be sheltered, but

I'm always in danger." Then lowered my voice. "We all are."

Silence passed between us. This week had been an unrelenting grievance for this family and organisation, the scale of the attack was unprecedented in my lifetime. And there was a threat banging on a pan in the back of all our heads, building like a migraine to incapacitate us. They just hadn't revealed themselves yet.

In a quiet wisp of breath, Neenan conceded. "Especially now."

"You think they really did it?"

"Who?"

"Rivals? Suppliers?" Karsteins. There was a desperate hope that maybe my sheltered lifestyle could remain in its cocoon, but the foreboding fog had begun to settle across the Ravencroft Estate. The writing plastered on the wall.

He gave me a sad smile. "I hope not."

Father said we went underground. But he lied.

We were lying in wait.

## Chapter 6

KENNA

They are going to kill me.

Darkness befell the Ravencroft Estate as I stood outside Laney's door. After she got pulled off of me in training, I'd been itching to see her again. Not only because of her

disappearing act that evening—this place was shrouded in mysteries that I wasn't yet privy to—but also because I feared that I was the cause for her worried expression as she left the training room. It was code for regret.

I'd only seen her in passing today. It wasn't good enough.

"I see the shadow of your feet under the door." A voice semi-shouted from the room. She's awake and feisty. I liked it. "You can come in."

I opened the door without a word. The sight before me took me by surprise. Laney sat at the centre of her bed, legs crossed, with a grey matted face mask on and a nail file in hand. It was a gentle image in comparison to the brutalist style of the barracks and the men who filled them. I was lucky that they placed me in the main house. They told me boys and girls don't mix. It wasn't problem for me, I wouldn't look at the boys twice anyway.

Her eyebrows raised as she took me in.

"Surprised to see me?" I said.

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“It wouldn’t be the first time I see you today.” She returned to focusing on her nails, which annoyed me. I had to feel her eyes on me.

I shrugged and strode to the edge of her bed in two steps. She still hadn’t looked up, so I slowly let my leather jacket fall from my shoulders. I was only wearing a deep maroon tank top underneath, the tops of my lace bra visible. I leaned over to show it off.

That got a glance from her. “You don’t have to do that.”

I blinked, “Do what?”

“Manipulate me. Tempt me. Make me forget. It won’t work.”

My voice grew huskier. “What makes you think I want to tempt you?”

“You wouldn’t be the first.”

That pissed me off. Princess being touched by somebody else? The visual alone made me sick. And for a moment I was too frozen by that thought that I didn’t consider who that could’ve been. So, I guessed. “Was it Neenan?”

“Ew, no.”

“Then who? A man?” That earned me a look and I had my answer confirmed when a sadness seemed to briefly wash over her. “Ah men. Isn’t it always?”

“Not really, you’re trying their tricks all the same.”

“But I’d treat you better.” And God I wanted to. I could satisfy her more than any man could, I knew it for certain. My dedication to the mission seemed to wane anytime I was near her. Get under her to get over her. Point. Blank.

She only rolled her eyes at that, so I reached across the bed and placed my hand on her knee. The spark was there as it was in the training room yesterday morning. I knew she felt it too when a soft redness lightened her cheeks, but her shoulders hung heavy. “Please, I’ve had a long day.”

I changed tact. “Off load on me. Speak your fears out loud and it’ll be cleansing.” I positioned myself at the top of her bed, back against the headboard and my legs spread either side of her, so that she could perfectly slot between them. Not in that way. Not yet.

She looked uncertain. As she reached for the nightstand, it looked like she was about to get up and walk away, away from me, but she grabbed a makeup wipe instead, lifting it to scrub at the grey mask on her face. To my shock and awe, when she disposed of the wipe, she sat down in front of me. Her back to my chest as she slowly reclined. My heart fluttered, but the proximity felt good. This touch was indulgent rather than sexual. It was new.

“You trust me?” I whispered in her ear.

“No.” Smart girl. She responded with a complicated look on her face. I knew she wanted to. I heard of her lonely walks into the forest and the way she stared at joking guardsmen. She wanted to be a part of that. “But let’s pretend.” She continued.

More than anything, exhaustion was written in bold across her features. The marks of a tough week are scattered around her room. Piles of clothing on the floor. The

overflow of the bin. The numerous half empty glasses dotted atop the furniture.

I looked around to gauge her style. Dark pastel greens and earthy browns painted the place as if it were a construction of nature itself. The fireplace was understated as the glowing embers released periodic gas, causing a spark. A painted portrait hung above the fireplace; Laney's subtle smile contrasting her father's sullen face.

The decor was deeply personal, capturing Laney's down-to-earth manner and an obvious inspiration from the surrounding hills with those that filled it—a pile of books on her bedside, mostly classics, but some romcoms. If she wouldn't talk about herself, she could talk about books. Stories were a language everyone spoke.

"You like to read?" I asked.

"My father basically taught me English through Shakespeare and classic literature. Though, the romances are my favourite."

Of course, they were. On the top of the pile was *Troilus and Cressida*—the tragic play about love and betrayal. I hadn't read it, only heard Mama talk about it. She had a collection similar to Laney's, but much smaller; she lost a lot of books in a fire when she was young. My bedtime stories were a mishmash of what she could remember.

"Do you want love like that?" I said, pointing at the book.

"No." She looked down. "But it makes me wonder."

"About how war corrupts promises?"

"About what it would feel like to be in a love so intense that it feels like sanctuary and sacrifice."



“Like is the love that is worth fighting for also worth dying for?”

“Yeah, but does it matter anyway if both options end in pain?”

Her words made me uneasy; she was entering a realm I'd always been told to avoid. Love wasn't something we celebrated at home. Instead, we focused on trust and loyalty. There was no doubt I loved my family, but I sometimes questioned whether my parents' exchanged glances were rooted in genuine affection or merely a shared commitment to our family's legacy. Whether that was love at all.

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Suspense clung in the thick air, intensifying the longer we remained silent. Laney stared transfixed at the fire, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. A deep frown became engraved on her mouth.

She was thinking too hard.

“I had a dream about you,” I broke the silence, and her ears perked up. “Not recently. But it is strange that we have the same recollection of this moment. We were barely teenagers in secondary school, and you were in a tartan skirt.”

Questions began to form in her head. In all my time observing her at St James’, she was prettiest when she was thinking. Behind her eyes were worlds of intellect and if the piles of books were any indication, they would be filled with intricate stories. I could see it at play now as the frown she wore was replaced by confusion. I got her attention.

“What colour?” She asked.

I smirked. I knew she wanted to know if I thought of her the same way she thought of me all this time. But whether I corroborated her story wasn’t important. The truth wasn’t important right now, I just needed her to focus on this rather than my history.

“I remember a room, dimly lit with mirrors reflecting off each wall. There was a faint dripping from a tap in the corner. I thought I was alone in there. Confused.”

She tried to interject again, twisting in her seat to look at me, but I kept still and continued speaking.

“The light would flicker when the wind swept in through the stained-glass window. It caused a chill, so I tried to hide in one of the alcoves of the room.”

The cubicles hid me well enough as I observed the lonely girl who had been sitting alone at lunch. While the chatter of children filled the room, she remained quiet. I could hear that same quiet now as she clung to each word. “But then, I heard a slight crying in the dark and it drew me out of the shadows. It was you, most definitely. I saw you then as I see you now, long dark blonde hair, piercing grey-green doe eyes, and these wonderful lips.” I placed a hand on her upper thigh, leaning in. Her eyes fixed on me. “With your looks alone, you won me. I wrapped a comforting arm around you, wishing to ease the tears with my caress.”

I shook my head. It was cruel, making it seem like a dream when it was the truth, but it wasn't fair to give her an illusion of connection when I needed to get over her. Truly, this obsession has brought me to this haunted house, and directly to the sight of an innocent dead girl. There was no future for us. Break the illusion.

“But—”

“And then you screamed a terrible screech, a light flashed, and my eyes flew open. I blinked to return to that place, but I just couldn't do it.” I fixed my gaze on her portrait, lifting my hand from her thigh to her hip. “My mother was at the foot of my bed. Dad was ready to begin my lesson.”

Laney opened her mouth to speak but no words tumbled out. Vulnerable. Malleable.

My hand dipped under her hoodie; my thumb gently caressed the soft skin. She hadn't recoiled from my touch, not even glanced at the journey of my hand. It didn't feel sexual, just close. Very close. And it was new.

“I dreamed of you.” Her gaze focused on me, and I suppressed a groan at her softened

eyes. “Your dark hair, the way you walk, and the way you eased my hurting. But it was all a daydream.” In an instant, she turned herself back around. “A teacher ushered me out the bathroom. Away from a ghost,” she spat underneath her breath, “Apparently.”

She turned back around and shivered when I tickled the fine hairs on her stomach.

“What did you think of me?” I said.

“I thought...” She began but paused as my fingertips grazed the top of her trousers and her breath became increasingly laboured. “I thought you walked down the corridors with strength, exuding confidence that I envied.”

“Uh-huh,” I urged.

“But you seemed lonely,” she said.

My hand slid below her waistband, “What else?” I whispered, my mouth in her ear.

“You looked hot in a skirt.” She blushed. “As you do now, in a leather jacket.”

Fingers thread through her pubic hair. “Oh yeah? You like that?”

“Oh yeah.” She said, “But I hate liars.” Suddenly, she slapped my hand away from her trousers and jumped from the bed to sit at her vanity. My hand stung. “Leave.”

“Laney,” I pleaded.

“Leave. Now.”

I left without another word.

Chapter 7

LANEY

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:35 pm*

It hadn't been a dream. I found her face in the background of a class photo when the Great Tenor Animal Sanctuary charity visited the school in the archived photo gallery on the next town's newspaper website.

Fuck her for making me doubt. She was no different than the rest.

Sometimes, I hated the ways of the brain. The way I clung and clutched to that minor detail—barely a minute of interaction—for years believing that someone could comfort me and be there for me.

The moment I stepped into the training room today, I felt her stare. Giving her the cold shoulder has been difficult the last few days. This morning, I caught her coming out the bathroom in just a towel. It took a lot of effort to look away from her bare legs, but really, I was stuck on her chest. A long pinkish scar ran below her collarbone. I've been returning her gaze to get a glimpse of it again. What did she go through to get that? A question I needed to get an answer to.

I ignored her knock at my door last night.

"It's always the hot ones that piss you off the most," Grant said beside me.

I returned a blank nod until he lifted his chin in Kenna's direction. "What did she do?"

"Lied."

"Damn, I knew there was something off with her." He shook his head. "Anyway, will

you be helping our session today? Waite assigned intensive bootcamp to the new foot soldiers and a refresher course for existing members.”

“I’ll be in the security office. Father wants me to run thorough background checks on all the people on the estate again after Dylan’s betrayal.”

It was a tough pill to swallow. Cracks were showing in our ranks, and it was the last thing we needed as we prepared for a conflict fast approaching. “You knew him?”

I broke eye contact, the wound still fresh. “Briefly. You?”

“Trained him,” He said, pain rife in his voice, “He’d been here for months, I should’ve known.” His eyes drifted to Kenna, and I followed his gaze. “But you never do know when someone will disappoint you.”

“Yeah.” I looked at Kenna before I cleared my throat. “Did he...did he act suspicious? The days before.”

“Not really. I mean, he disappeared on occasion but that’s not uncommon. I just thought he went to get pissed on cheap beer in the forest with some of the lads, not that he was planning a murder on an innocent girl.”

The shadow I saw the night Granddaddy died. “Oh,” I responded. The guardsmen preferred the firepit to the woods. “...uhh, what were his skills?”

“He was an excellent marksman, and we didn’t teach him that, he came in with those skills. Never really took to blades. Guess it makes sense now.”

“What do you mean? Tilly was murdered with a knife.”

He turned to me. “You didn’t hear? It was a bullet that took her life.”

“What? No! The cameras have sound recording. That’s too risky, the noise—”

“They found a silencer under his pillow in the barracks.” He said, giving me an apologetic, yet cold smile. These. These are the details I needed to hear, but Father told me nothing. My cheeks heated in shame as I realised that I’m still that sheltered little girl. Alone. Unaware. Innocent but with blood on her hands. It filled me with anger. “Kenna was right.”

“Kenna?”

“She found him and turned him in.”

Why didn’t she tell me?

Grant placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “I won’t let it happen again.”

“No, it won’t,” I looked up at him, straightening my back. “I’ll be in my office until after dark. Have a good day, Grant.”

I left in a hurry without a glance behind me. Still, I could feel the weight of eyes trace my way to the door.

?

When I met my father at breakfast the next morning, I was burning with questions. A long table divided us in the quiet of our family dining room. Considering that there were just us two left, the feeling of dead space was overwhelming. Grandad often stayed up North, but his absence was felt in moments like these as if something were missing. God, I wished his voice filled this room.

We stayed silent for a long moment. Father’s newspaper was folded at his side to



show the London nightlife section. Money was never far out of his mind. When I clicked my teacup loudly against the saucer, I yearned for his eyes to turn to mine. He hadn't looked at up at me this entire time.

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He hummed. “Our dear friends from the Novelli dynasty have agreed to attend the funeral for Edward. Though, Aldo seemed quite preoccupied over the phone, something about Flavia’s illness or—”

I tried to restrain my eye roll. My hope that he would be transparent about the circumstances of Tilly’s death or the investigation into his father’s death depleted the longer he said nothing. He was already looking forward before addressing the past. Might as well face it head on.

“Why didn’t you tell me that Tilly died the same way as Granddaddy?” I tried to sound confident, but between the words, my heart broke a little more with each syllable.

“Sunshine,” he began, his eyes softening in a caricature-kind of way. “We don’t need business talk at the breakfast table. I’m now the head of this family. Hell, I’m the head of the syndicate. Things are going to work a little differently than they did before.”

“I understand that, but—”

“Listen. Information is a luxury I cannot give as freely anymore. Tilly’s death revealed that they know our location. That they are among us. I can’t risk speaking it aloud in the house. Do you understand?” Do you not trust me?

“You made me kill him without knowing the full extent of his crimes, Father. The brutality of it...I could’ve...” I was at a loss as to what I really wanted. All I knew was that his omission felt like isolation. It hurt. “And the fact that he was one of us—”

“DON’T associate him with us. There is no us. Right now, I trust that blood is thicker, but you can’t trust anyone, you hear me? Anyone.”

“I just want to feel—”

“This isn’t about feeling, Laney. War is coming. Until I know what they are waiting for, I want you prepared, but not at risk.”

“I can handle it.”

“I don’t want you to.”

My shoulders sagged at that. I was strong. I was capable.

“You know it's them, right?” I said in a quiet voice. We both knew who they was, I dared not speak the name in case of inciting violence, but that hope was quickly crushed.

He slapped his hand on the table, causing the glasses to clink. I flinched at the sound. “It is not them! They are gone, Laney, how often do I need to say it?”

I narrowed my eyes as I shook my head. I couldn’t understand why we shouldn’t be preparing for any possible avenue of attack. It was obvious whoever it was knew of the existence of the estate, even the geographies of Great Tenor, I just couldn’t discern a motive. Grandfather mourned them, our families were bonded until the accident. Father was a teenager when the Karstein home burned, he could probably remember details about them to figure out why they might return with such vengeance.

Before I could formulate words, he held his hand up with a serious look on his face. “I won’t say it again,” he warned and sighed. “Have you completed the enhanced

vetting process for current and incoming cadets?”

It took a moment for his words to register, I was still stuck on the sting of his dismissal. I’ve been trained since birth, my head is never fully facing one direction. Ever. What else have I prepared for if not imminent war? There was something he won’t admit.

“Sunshine.” He prompted.

“Yes, Sir. I’ve got the verified list of guardsmen and cadets, I’m going through them one by one. Sorted by years of service.”

“Good girl.” I grimaced and grabbed one of the pastries on the table as I headed out the room. I was done. “Oh, and Laney? The devil comes from within.”

I took more considerable strides on my way to my office. God, fuck him.

The devil comes from within was his barely veiled critique for my past mental health issues, as if to say, you are the problem, you created it, don’t let it implode you. It was the cornerstone philosophy of the counselling I received at eighteen, endorsed by Father, of fucking course. Bullshit.

My eyes couldn’t roll further back into my head.

“The devil comes from within.” I spat under my breath as I rounded a corner before jumping back when a person blocked the way.

“I thought I was the devil?” She joked.

I narrowed my eyes and kept walking. “Not the devil, just a liar.”

She followed. “You weren’t in training today.”

“Wow, she knows how to speak facts.”

“Funny.” She sighed, softly. “I was told that you were the head of cyber security services. I think it would be beneficial for my training to understand the security protocols in place to enhance my enforcement role.”

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I wasn't sure what she was asking.

"I would like to shadow you." She finally said.

"Everyone must complete basic training."

Kenna took a step toward me, leaning down to whisper, "But I want to be close to you."

"No!" A booming voice announced behind us. "Return to training."

For a moment, I thought he was talking to me, but his eyes were locked on Kenna. She didn't say anything, but she appeared to scan his body, as if sizing him up for a fight. Her shoulders are pushed back, and perfectly still, unafraid. While I know her strength, Father's speed was underestimated for a middle-aged man.

"Now!"

Kenna gave me a pleading look before taking off to the west wing.

I watched her leave and shut my eyes.

"What did I tell you about not trusting anyone? And immediately I find you fraternising with the cadets. Again, might I add. Stay away from her."

I don't even want her. "I didn't seek her out, Father. I listened to what you said."

“Remember what you are protecting.”

“I do!” I replied. “But it’s not rational for me to ignore the cadets that I teach.”

He extended his hand. I was confused for a second until I reached for it and felt the soft metal of jewellery. My attempt at concealing a gasp failed as soon as I unwrapped our hands to reveal a locket on a chain. It held a singular image inside.

The sight made me choke on air.

“Remember what’s at stake.”

I shook my head. Tears collected on my chin, a drop landed in my hand— on the locket.

Inside was a picture of a newborn baby.

Georgia.

## Chapter 8

KENNA

Richard Ravencroft was the last person I expected to be a cockblock. As I passed him in the hallway, I paused for a moment to give him a cordial nod. I’m not suicidal enough to get on his bad side, at least not outwardly. Dylan’s disappearance wasn’t coincidental. It hadn’t been addressed but I knew.

He had watched me, but his expression gave nothing away. He was stoic and so uninterested that it almost made me feel small. Instead, I treated it as a challenge. His days were numbered. If only he knew.

With my head held high, I strode with faux purpose in the direction of the training room. At the end of the hall, I turned left, not right. I hoped that would show him my strength, but a look over my shoulder confirmed he'd already left.

I went outside. I was going to have to circle back to Laney. She had to be my mentor; it was the only way.

Reaching the treeline of the perimeter woodland, I dug my phone from my pocket. My other phone. The number I called connected to the first tone.

“Status report.”

“Hello to you too, Mama.”

“Don’t start with me, this is a focused mission. Failure is not an option. What have you got so far?”

“Not a lot. Just a stray henchmen gone rogue. Why didn’t you tell me there would be others here?”



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“Your dad agreed that infiltration worked better than a surprise attack. There are too many moving parts to—”

“To leave it to me? I had to find a young girl slaughtered.” I fought down bile. “You are lucky it seems he was tight lipped, because he almost exposed all of us. Do you not trust me?”

“I just know that long missions can be difficult. We adapt to the environment we surround ourselves in. Why do you think I lost my accent, huh? We’ve got to keep each other accountable.”

“Accountable?” I scoffed and covered my mouth with my hand, hiding my moving lips from view. “He’s dead, Mama.”

“You saw a body?” It was as if she shrugged it off. Our numbers were already low, we didn’t need them dwindling too. Sacrifice was one thing, but downright stupidity was not the strategy I’d been taught from childhood.

“More like I felt the reverberations of the gunshot.” It wasn’t public, but it was obvious, like planting a seed in the ground. The disrupted soil was clear while the actual seed was buried out of view.

“Do not get emotional on me now.” There was a pause before she spoke again, this time quieter. “Do we have a date?”

“Yes,” I said as I cupped a hand around my mouth and lifted the phone speaker close. “In twenty-four days.”

“Good. That’s your deadline.”

“I know.”

“November seventh.”

I nodded, though she couldn’t see it.

“Get it done.” She hung up. The typical Karstein send off.

I threw the phone to the ground, and the heel of my boot hard down on it, perhaps with more aggression than was necessary, but it needed to be done somehow. Why not the cathartic way?

After each communication, we destroyed the phone. It was a protocol that meant I never had a phone number of my own—it seemed like a modern-day hell to always be approachable to anyone with your contact. For the longest time, I thought it held me back from people my age, but Dad was right, you don’t need a constant connection. Trust yourself.

After the fire, my family embraced death. The rhetoric that time heals all wounds proved to be a cruel lie; time didn’t heal, it fortified. Revenge brewed and bonded us, all time did was allow us to be prepared to conquer.

But first, there was a girl I had to conquer.

I loathed the Ravencrofts, they massacred my entire family, but I can’t stop wanting her. If only I could deliver one bullet to Richard’s head and grab her hand to run away to some quiet hotel room in the city. Instead, I was faced with the almost impenetrable human shield that the wretched man had built around himself.

Picking up the pace, I walked out the canopy of trees and I headed toward the security office she'd told Grant she would be in all day. I'll get her to forgive and forget soon enough. I need her on top of me, honestly.

I slipped inside the darkened office without knocking, pasting my back flat on the back wall.

Laney had her headphones on. The only light in the room was the glare from the screen, which lightened the edges of her dirty blonde hair. Around her were expensive technologies, it was hard to feel bad for her in the grandeur of it all. If only I grew up with such access.

"Neenan, I'm busy." She said briefly lifting one headphone away from her ear before returning it in place.

I breathed lightly, not moving a muscle. I didn't mean to lurk, truly but the words I planned to say, the questions that had formed, seemed to have left my mind at her sight.

Before I could think to quietly slip back out, she turned in her chair. As soon as she saw me, her voice jumped an octave, "Get out!"

God, she's beautiful.

"Jesus, do you not listen?" She rattled on. "You are not allowed to be in here. Leave. Now."

I stepped out of the shadows, walking a slow line toward her chair, silent.

She narrowed her eyes at me, challenge littered across her features as she leaned back in her chair in a faux-relaxed position.

Leaning over her seat, I placed each hand on the armrests so that we breathed the same air. I could smell the sweet lavender scent she wore.

Laney inhaled deeply, her eyes closing in a lethargic manner. She exhaled just as deep. “Kenna,” she breathed, her voice wispy.

“Yes,” I hissed softly back.

When she struggled to find a moment of clarity to speak, I took the opportunity to study her features. The room was darkened, but I could still see the green-tinted grey of her eyes, the soft spattering of freckles on her nose, and the way that her dirty blonde hair showed highlights in reduced light.

I looked briefly at her screen. There was a list of names: some in red, underlined, and some crossed out in green, but my name wasn't there.

My gaze returned to her. “I'll be at your door tonight.”

Laney shifted beneath me.

“Don't ignore my knock this time,” I said, pushing myself off her chair and walking out the door.

### Chapter 9

#### LANEY

Ididn't think that the girl who had haunted my teenage dreams would be such a brat. The way she came into my private space and demanded I listened to her. I could forgive that she was new, but I couldn't stand an ego. I would show her.

“Do you want to hang out tonight?” I said to Neenan across from me in the barracks' mess hall. Can't ignore a knock if I wasn't there to hear it.

Two plates of chilli con carne sat between us, perfectly untouched, as I build the courage to dig in. Being in such a remote location meant our food was often made from cans and grains. My father, top management and I usually received the limited fresh produce we could get. Yet, I ate the mess hall food more often than my mother probably would've liked, but sometimes, the plain food was exactly what I needed—comfort food.

“Did they change cooks or something?” He continued to look at his plate with disgust.

“I don't know.” I spoke fast. “But we could watch a film or sneak out in the woods, start a fire,” I wiggled my eyebrows.

“Yeah, right. You mean I start the fire, while you hide under a blanket and then paint our nails.”

“I'll make sure yours are very pretty, rest assured.” I gave him my best doe eyes. “Pretty please.”

“Are you even allowed outside?”

“Allowed? I'm not a teenager.”

“I don't know, man. The woods are scary, who knows what is out there? Or worse...who is out there?”

“I'll bring knives,” I defended.

“As if you don't have one strapped to your thigh right now,” he said, daring to shovel a mouthful of rice into his mouth.

“And on my ankle.” I smiled.

He grimaced at that moment, leaning forward, and sputtering over the table.

“Are you okay? Oh my God!”

He swallowed a couple of times before he could speak again.

“Can we go to your kitchen? I’ll let you paint my toenails.” Father and I had our own kitchen and supplies hidden in the dimmest corner of the manor. It had once belonged to the service men and women in the seventeenth century when the house and the home were two separate spheres, but it meant that it was always quiet. Out of sight, out of mind. I sometimes snuck Neenan down there as a reprieve from the outside world. It didn’t hurt that the cupboards were filled. Everyone needs a block of chocolate every now and then. “But not my fingernails, okay!”

I laughed as we stood.

“Keep an eye out for anyone looking,” I told Neenan, while I checked over my shoulder periodically looking for long dark hair. Since Kenna’s visit to my office, I’d been on guard. It had spooked me, not because it was her, but because I was so vulnerable in front of her, and I hated it. I had to spit my words out to be heard. Her proximity stifled me, and I couldn’t give her the power. It would drown me. I had to show her I was stronger than that, and not just at the whims of my feelings.

He nodded to my request, glancing around each new hallway we passed. If he was suspicious, he didn’t show it, even when I suddenly reached my hand out to stop him in his tracks as I saw a person with a leather jacket in the distance. One look at the person's hair, and my chest deflated. It was short. Not her.

“Are you hiding from someone?” He asked.

“No,” I denied too fast. “Just thought I saw something.”



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He gave me a sceptical look but said nothing and continued to the door of the private kitchen. When the door clicked shut, Neenan was done being quiet. We'd basically lived parallel lives, he recognised a shift in the air before I could even release my next breath.

“Why are you hiding from Kenna?”

“I'm not,” I insisted, looking inside the fridge for something to eat. I saw Red Leicester cheese and grabbed it immediately. As I grabbed the block of cheese, another red food caught my eye and caused them to glaze over.

Red velvet cake. It was still there. I gulped, thickly. I miss you, Til.

He came up behind me and placed a light hand on my shoulder. I tried not to shudder. Unsuccessfully. “It's okay to be paranoid. With the attacks on your family and the fact that Dylan—”

“It's not that.” I said. Next, I opened a cupboard in search of crackers. Cheese and crackers were a meal, right? It's basically a sandwich. “She scares me.”

“So, it is about Kenna,” he said, chuffed.

“That's not what I said.” I kept my gaze on the cupboard, away from Neenan, but I still didn't see the crackers. A whack of a cupboard shutting startled me from my daze as I felt a solid rectangular thing in my hand. Crackers.

“Thanks,” I whispered to him. We sat at the breakfast bar, without plates, peacefully

munching on cheese and crackers sandwiches but I sensed the silence was temporary.

“What did she do?”

“Nothing,” I shook my head, but eventually accepted that it was futile to deny. He already knew. The words left me with a sigh. “She lied to me.”

He gave me a sympathetic smile. “About what?” he coaxed.

“It’s not important, she’s not as I remembered.”

“So, it’s her. Really her?”

“Yeah,” I said sadly.

Out of all the people on this estate, Neenan was the only one who truly knew the effect that the bathroom incident meant to me. Well, besides Tilly but...yeah. I’d never been comforted like that before. Physical touch was hard. An aloof father, an absent mother and a life of secrecy on what was basically a military base meant that the only touch I knew was harsh. Not necessarily aggressive or abusive, just cold. Unaffectionate. And very heavily male.

To be touched by a woman. A nice woman. Was everything.

I held that experience close to my heart, daily. Now, I knew I had to let it go.

Yet, amongst all the grief, I can’t take another loss.

“What was the lie?”

When I thought back to the moment, I saw her in the hallway the day she arrived, I

was filled with hope that maybe I was deserving of this fantasy. That it could be real. But her denial of knowing me felt like a betrayal. “She told me she was homeschooled. That it couldn’t be her.”

“And you’re sure she doesn’t have a twin?”

“It’s her,” I said with absolute certainty. Her features were not the only similarity; it was her voice—husky and reserved. “I’m sure.”

Pulling me into a side hug, Neenan breathes the words into my hair. “I’m sorry, Laney.”

For a long moment, the only sound that could be heard was the crunch of crackers. Neenan was eating like he had been ravished, but I couldn’t stomach another bite.

“You know,” He started, “It could be innocent. You were at that school for what? Two weeks—”

“Four. It was four weeks.”

“Okay and do you remember all the people you saw there?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Maybe she just didn’t remember what you looked like. If I remember the story as you told me, you guys barely even spoke.”

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“She says she’s homeschooled, Neenan.”

“You were homeschooled too.” I started to argue but Neenan raised his hand to my face. “If someone came up to you right now and they asked how you were educated, what would you say?”

“That I’m homeschooled.”

“Yes!”

“With a stint at public school.”

Neenan’s face fell. But he was undeterred. Really, I wished to talk about anything else besides Kenna and her lies. “Okay, okay, but what if she did the same? And just said homeschooled to simplify it.”

Making sure to fully face him, I moulded my expression to reflect the ridiculous conspiracy that he was concocting. “Can we just set up the fire pit?” I said, exasperated as I looked away again.

“No.” Neenan grabbed my chin, his eyes bored into mine. “It doesn’t have to be a personal betrayal. She might not have known that it would hurt you so.”

“I don’t want to talk about it!” Anger simmered under my skin, but I refused to let it boil. I needed the subject to change right now. “I’m sure we still have some marshmallows here somewhere,” I said, jumping up from my seat and rummaging through various cupboards and tins. “I’ll grab the nail polish after we get set up and

everything.”

His eyes were wide as he took in my frantic movements but thankfully, he let it go. “Yeah, they’re by the kettle. Forrester likes marshmallows in his hot chocolate.”

“Really?” I laughed, grateful to disperse some of the tension in my body.

“Really, really. Has done so since I was a kid. He made me drink hot chocolate before tea. Very un-British of him.” He jokingly scolded.

I grabbed the marshmallows and got some skewers before we went to the backdoor.

## Chapter 10

### KENNA

My relentless knocking was making my knuckles hurt. A light was coming from under her door, so I knew she was inside.

“I know you are in there, Laney. Open up!” I halfway yelled.

It was just about to turn nine o'clock and the lingering echoes of commands and instructions are starting to fade. All that remained was my steady beating on Laney's door. Sharing a wall meant that I learned her routine fast. At this time of night, she'd be curled into bed with the fire roaring, the flipping of pages the only sound. But whilst the fire crackled, the paper wasn't shuffling. Had something changed?

As I continued to knock, the growing redness around my knuckles made me pause and in that split second of silence, I noted a different kind of shuffle. Not of pages, but of boots.

“Miss Whether, what are you doing at my daughter’s door screaming?”

Jesus Christ, again? Richard Ravencroft stood behind me, watching, about ten feet away. He was flanked on both sides by a rotation of men, his usual entourage. I held still to avoid rolling my eyes.

“I noticed how you’ve become close with her quickly. What are your intentions?” He narrowed his already dead eyes. Twenty-three days.

Turning toward him, I held my hands up and smiled. “Completely chaste ones, Sir, I promise. Just wanted to see if she wanted to have a cup of tea with me and sit by the fireplace.” Even my most polite voice couldn't hide the simmering anger and disappointment of his daughter's decision to ignore me.

He hummed and came closer, leaving his guards a couple steps behind him, until his body loomed over me. “Your racket could be heard all the way in my office. I don’t enjoy interruption.”

“Of course, Sir.” I laid the charm on thick. “Do you know where Laney is? If not here?”

Flicking his wrist upward, he prompted his men to leave.

I love when a man underestimates me. He clearly didn’t think of me as a threat as my hand slipped behind me, out of view from his glaring eyes. They stayed fixed above me, intimidating only if I hadn't been fuelled by the irritation of his family name.

He ignored my question. “Tomorrow is Tilly’s funeral. Do I trust that you will attend without causing a nuisance? Drama seems to follow you.”

I nodded. Under the hem of my shirt, I found the butt end of a handgun. His grating

voice beamed over me as I cocked the safety off. It always paid to be prepared.

This wasn't the perfect time. But it was a rare opportunity where I had caught him alone. I looked up at him, wondering if, in his arrogance, he could see the damage he bestowed onto his surrounding soldiers. He wasn't going to win the war.

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A faint giggle from outside the manor rattled through the open windows with the wind. It was a chilly evening but the old insulation in this building often made the air thick and stuffy. That sound anchored me, and my hand let go of the cool metal weapon at my back.

I wasn't going to end this war.

Not now. It was too reckless, too soon, and I wasn't done with Laney yet. I recognised her laugh from a mile away. In Richard cold eyes, it seemed that he hadn't noticed.

“Words, Whether.” Richard said, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Yes, Sir.” I replied as I turned on my heel and followed in the direction of the sound.  
“You can trust me.”

And as I strode toward the backdoor, Richard Ravencroft returned to what I presumed was his office. No harm done.

As I grew closer to where Laney's laugh originated, my lungs filled with a smell akin to gunpowder. Smoke. And Laney's giggle had been replaced with a soft rhythmic humming. It was a stark reminder that that was way too close. I had twenty-three more days to do this. If I had pulled my gun out then, I would lose her forever.

Exiting through the backdoor, I entered the fresh air of the forest, and after a minute of walking, I saw a distant fire pit with two bodies either side—Neenan and Laney. When I approached where they sat, the temperature increased, and the humming



morphed into singing. I couldn't yet decipher the lyrics, but the voice was powerful and beautifully feminine. Laney.

There was no background music, just the acoustic notes of sustained vocals. It almost made me stumble as I kept my eyes on the target, negating where my feet landed on the uneven ground.

I stopped before I reached them. Simply overcome by her grace, my aggression and need for answers were stifled. Instead, I stood and enjoyed the ambiance in the bubble that Laney's singing had created. Even Neenan appeared transfixed where he sat opposite to her with his bare feet out. Both their heads bowed, and I could now see a necklace shimmer in the light of the flames clutched in her hand.

Tomorrow is Tilly's funeral. This was a vigil.

As she finished the song, reality dawned on me. I have no business being here. Especially as Neenan looked right at me and nodded for Laney to look too.

In an instance, I turned around.

As I was leaving, I heard Neenan's faint whisper. "She wouldn't understand."

But I understood. The Ravencrofts destroyed my family. It was only right that they felt an ounce of our pain, but I was naïve in assuming that death would hurt leadership. Collateral damage came with war, I knew that, but Richard wasn't wallowing in grief, Laney was. And I couldn't stand it.

Instead of heading inside, I walked into the surrounding forest and kept a steady pace. It was safe enough. The gates were secured, my gun was in my jeans, and my boots could fracture a face if I swung it hard enough. I would be alright.

The dark night didn't have the allure that I thought it once might. The deep foliage was empty, still, and even with minimal light carried a natural splendour that eclipsed any fear I might have with comfort. There weren't many paths to follow so I straddled fallen beams and evaded nettles and brambles.

A prickle halted my movements as a branch of brambles stuck to my clothing. It pierced the skin on my leg, but only enough to lift skin, not draw blood. It still stung though. As I nursed the wound, something caught my eye. A beam of moonlight lit a green open space ahead.

I strode right to it, so soon the woods opened to a path of gravel overgrown with weeds. At the end of the gravel path was brick, blackened as the stone crumbled with age.

Mama warned me to not go too deep in the forest. Bottom lip entrapped in my teeth; I was afraid this was what she'd feared I'd find—our ancestral home turned to dust.

## Chapter 11

### LANEY

Sat on the cold pew of the abandoned Church on the outskirts of Great Tenor, I wished I were anywhere else. There were so many things that I wanted to have told Tilly. I was sure she would know the answer to my Kenna question. She would talk me down from my anxiety about the impending war—a war she was a casualty of. It was a realisation that struggled to compute with my worldview.

Father was beside me, but his impassive face looked no different than on the average occasion. We were in the second row. Tilly's husband sat directly in front of me, his eyes red from restraint, as his arm wrapped around Tilly's mother. The sight caused the kind of devastation in my heart that left a mark. I'd already cried this morning,

but it wasn't enough to cleanse the hole in my gut.

Nothing could erase the damage. In times like these, I yearned for Grandfather's warm hug. It was already a rare moment in his self-isolation when I could feel his enveloping presence, but the absence of him hollowed my heart. I'd hoped that Kenna could be that calming pillar in my life, perhaps, naively.

The ceremony was small. Only those that directly knew her were invited.

Neenan stood on patrol at the side of the Church. He gave me a glance every now and then, checking for tears. I knew he kept an extra handkerchief in his pocket just for me.

The pastor placed his book down on a stand to the left of the closed casket, causing a hush across all the attendees and a stabbing sob from Tilly's mother. This was happening. Too quick. "It saddens me to be gathered here today for the loss of such a young life—" The pastor began, sharing stories and anecdotes of the way she impacted us all.

I held strong until my name was mentioned, releasing the floodgates of grief that I had suppressed. With it, an insidious sense of emptiness returned to my gut. I had no one left. Who did I have now that she was gone? Why did I need the comfort of others so badly? Stupid!

I bowed my head and cried into my hands. My father didn't move to console me. Not even Neenan came to give me his handkerchief. Stupid girl, no one cares.

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“...her joy brought smiles to the saddest sods,” Tilly’s husband murmured through his speech. “But she is brightest when she is in front of Georgia. God, her eyes glazed over when she was in sight. My baby...”

Tears streamed, and through my blurred eyes, I saw a darkened figure sit down beside me and placed a black handkerchief on my lap, each corner inscribed with a decorative ‘K’. I blinked a few times, and I was grateful for the momentary distraction, but then I examined the hand that now gripped my knee in comfort, it made me shiver. I knew that hand and I loathed it.

It belonged to Logan Novelli. My ex-husband.

I sniffed aggressively in the most unladylike way and shifted to be closer to Father.

“The girl over there told me to give this to you. You looked like you needed it.” He said in a tone the least bit appropriate for a funeral. Did he even know her?

But then he pointed at the girl where she sat in the back corner of the Church by the entrance. Kenna. She came.

“I’m sorry about Tilly, she was a nice girl.” Logan had very little empathy, a quality that Father admired about him, but I despised.

I tried to focus on the service, but Logan continued to whisper in my ear. He was a physically powerful man, six foot four, athletic and trigger-happy as an ex-military man who was discharged for unlawful roughness. “Did you miss me? I bet—”

“SSHHH!”

Heads turned toward me, my cheeks blushed but anger surged into me when I saw the smug and confident refrain on Logan’s face. I wanted to slap him. Time and place, Laney. Time and place.

Maybe I didn’t want to sit here and succumb to my grief in front of the entire estate and my family, but I certainly will not allow Logan Novelli to ruin the remembrance of my dearest companion and cousin. It should only be a shame on him for his behaviour. However, in my world, a woman’s moral character was dictated by the value they have to the men that surround them. I will not be held accountable to the assholery of this man due to our prior arrangement.

I felt the anger heaving and boiling over, but my face remained still. I learnt that from Father. In fact, I mimicked him now as he blankly stared ahead, unaware or inconsiderate to the vile man that he let into my life.

Logan fisted my dress between his fingers, lifting it with it. I attempted to lean away from him, but my leg was already pressed against Father’s.

I was stuck. Still, I yanked my dress from his grip, but stilled when I saw the rose quartz encrusted band that sat on his finger—our wedding ring. I threw mine in a lake years ago. Why did he still have it on?

The Novelli Dynasty was an infamous Italian mafia family that resided on the Southernly coast of England. They played a vital part in Ravencroft victory against the Karsteins after the fissure as our silent partner. It was pure strategy to wed the two of us, but we never consummated the marriage. Not for lack of trying on his part.

It’s a loss that I’m not certain Father has recovered from and was likely the reason he didn’t seem to care about Logan’s handsy pandering now.

“Get. Off.” I grit out.

He returned a coy smirk. His grip tightened on my leg.

“Are you done pissing me off?” I asked.

“Never.”

Quickly, I reached into my sock to retrieve a little knife and stabbed it into his hand atop my knee. His blood dripped onto my dress as the funeral service was playing its last song. Thank fuck, I’m wearing black.

“Bitch,” He cursed, but still didn’t move his hand.

I moved to stab him again. But he grabbed my wrist, blood trickling down his arm and smeared on mine.

“Do not.” He warned. If the wound hurt, he didn’t let it show, but returned his arm to his lap, mopping up the blood with his black pocket square.

The last note of the song marked the end of the service. Quiet chatter filled the room again as most people got up to leave. I was so occupied with Logan’s unexpected presence that I hadn’t noticed Tilly’s family in front of me, huddled together, exchanging hugs and kisses now as tears still readily flowed.

I went to stand too, but Logan blocked my way, turning his entire chest to face me. Anger reignited in my heart, and I shoved at his shoulder, kicked his legs and did everything besides yelling in his ear. I wanted to slap him.

So, I did. Well, I tried to.

In that moment, Logan was pulled back on the pew roughly and a fist entered his face.

I flinched, but not in fear. I looked up to see the attacker had long dark brown, almost black, hair that shimmered brown in certain lights and fell to just below her shoulders. A smile appeared on my face without thought. Seeing Logan get punched was the best moment of my life, I'm not even sad that I wasn't the one who threw it.

My smile turned into a full on anxiety laugh as Kenna offered an extended hand to help me step over Logan who had crumpled to the floor from the weight of the punch—total smackdown. I'm impressed.

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Quickly, I remembered my surroundings and noticed the room hadn't entirely emptied out after Tilly's funeral. Father watched keenly but made no move to help me or Logan in this situation. Neenan had inched closer but was pulled away into a hushed discussion with his father.

I took Kenna's hand, and with her help I climbed onto the pew in my short heels and stepped over Logan's cowering body. A small puddle of blood had formed below where I sat. At that moment, I noticed that Logan wasn't complaining or groaning.

"Did you knock him out cold?" I said in a mix of disbelief and admiration.

She shrugged in response. Still hand in hand, she guided me off of the pew onto solid ground. I looked up at her through my lashes. It was like I was in a happy state of shock, outwardly I schooled my expression for the circumstance, but internally, I was screaming love for this girl.

I shook my head to rid myself of those thoughts. Too soon. It was too much. Too much of a fantasy, the miserable hope, which had kept me stagnant and captive and longing for the day Kenna would return to save me. To cure my chronic loneliness. It wasn't rational, and it wasn't as if she had done anything in particular to earn my trust, but this felt like a new leaf.

Take me away. I pleaded with my eyes that were still on hers.

She got the memo and pulled me out the door into the surrounding woods. We were far from Great Tenor and much further from the Ravencroft Estate. I didn't say that though, and I didn't care either.



The forest enveloped us whole. Faintly, I heard my name shouted but ignored it, blindly following my teenage phantom as she led me into darkness. Once the Church became out of sight and once the whimsical tune of distant songbirds replaced the voices of cadets, Kenna dropped my hand. And with it, my lethargic dreaming was erased from my mind so it could face reality.

This was a girl who had lied to me. And my final goodbye to the one girl I trusted had been ruined by a man.

I needed my best friend, and I would never see her again. I wanted to see Kenna in the image of my best friend so that she could be the grounded and trusted friend that I needed right now but she wasn't. Nothing could replace the bright, beautiful girl that will be soon cocooned in the cold earth.

No. No. Stay. I began to whimper. Tilly. Breathe in. Oh, my Lord, Tilly and her husband. Breathe out. Her family, God, I'll never see them again. Breathe in. And her face and her ideas. Breathe out. Companionship, gone with the wind. A drop fell onto my head, and I flinched so hard I almost stumbled.

And Logan! Jesus, who invited Logan. Calm. What does he want? Down. Was it not over? Calm. I need it to be over. Down. The ring. Breathe. Please. Please. Please. Just one day. "Laney?" A soft voice interjected. "In. Hold...two...three...four. Out."

And Father. Oh my, why doesn't he care? Calm. What did I do? The. I need. Fuck. I want. Down.

"Kenna," I grabbed her arm, leaning all my weight on it. I felt lethargic all over again just not in a happy-go-lucky kinda way. A fresh scent clung to her like she had traversed a forest of pine trees and fallen into a pile of tea tree leaves. I focused on that, but I couldn't help the barrage of conflicting emotion that was escalating my breathing at an alarming rate.

I need to stop. I want to stop. Let me stop. Please. “I’m going to faint.”

Barely audible, I heard, “I’ll catch you.” Before the world went dark.

## Chapter 12

KENNA

She was only out for about ten seconds.

I caught her when she fell, and lowered her to the floor, her head on my lap.

Her heart beat out of her chest so hard that I think it must’ve hurt. I placed my hand on her heart so that I could register when it settled, but after a minute, it still hadn’t. After a brief panic, her eyes finally opened again.

“How long was I out for?”

“About ten seconds. But after, you had your eyes closed for a minute or so.”

“Yeah, I was trying not to throw up.”

My attempt at a smile came out sad. I could tell because her face morphed into a scene of embarrassment, but it wasn’t pity I was trying to convey, only worry.

Really, I only had one question on my mind.

“What did he do to you?” I wasn’t above violent retaliation. In fact, that man was lucky he got punched, if weapons were permitted in the Church, he’d have a matching hole in his head to his hand. When I caught sight of his hand on her, I was already seething but, the moment I noticed her protests, my anger boiled over into

full-blown rage.

“It was a long time ago,” she tried to dismiss.

“Tell me.”

I wasn't about to listen to any statute of limitations. In my eyes, justice didn't have a time limit. If she thought this wasn't a big deal, she was sorely mistaken. I conveyed this conviction in my face.

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She looked away from me then. Her features fell into a pained expression. “Please,” she breathed.

“Give me one good reason to not go back to that Church and gut him like a fish.”

She closed her eyes. “Please, don’t start another war.”

The words shocked me. We’re at war? I knew the attacks on Laney’s family were provocations, but it was still the cold war stage. The Ravencrofts hadn’t retaliated yet.

“There is no war,” I said but my tone wasn’t entirely sure. As far as I knew, they didn’t suspect a Karstein plot. Or does Laney know more than she let on?

“There will be. You can’t kill Logan Novelli, he is part of a dangerous family, we can’t afford to piss them off.”

“But they pissed you off!”

“Yes, but I am a girl.” She choked. “Collateral damage.”

The thought reinvigorated my anger again. It wasn’t reason enough to withhold justice, I just needed a justification. “What happened with Logan?” I said, darkly.

She lifted herself off the floor, coming to stand on shaky feet, then turned her head to me. Her eyes were filled with a mixture of sorrow and resignation that made my stomach churn. “You really want to know?” More than anything. I nodded. “We were married.”

What the fuck.

That was the last thing I expected her to say.

“Father set us up. In this world, it was perfectly routine to be engaged by seventeen. We were married the day after my eighteenth. May sixth.” She began walking further into the woods as she spoke.

I followed, transfixed and quiet at this new information. How had I missed this in my reconnaissance? “How old was he?”

“Thirty-two.”

I grimaced. She was married four years ago, making him Thirty-six now.

Laney shrugged as if it were a regular thing. Though, thinking about it, Tilly’s husband appeared to be a lot older than us too. We listened to the song of the birds while the words hung in the air like grease clung to pans. If only I could drench myself in boiling hot water to rid the disgusting feeling that had overcome my body.

“He hurt you?”

“No,” she breathed. I didn’t believe her for a second. “Not really.”

I stopped in my tracks, shooting her a confused and disbelieving glance.

“He’s an asshole. I don’t deny that.” She kept walking. “It’s just...I was the problem. I couldn’t be a wife. Not to him.”

The light dwindled the further we traversed into the forest, and with it, the warmth of the sunshine. Laney’s flowing dress couldn’t have retained much heat, but if she was

cold, she didn't show it, even as I caught a glimpse of the goosebumps forming on her arms.

"Somehow I don't believe that," I whispered softly, stepping close to her to share some of my body heat. I'm not sure it was working.

"It's the truth," She began, again, defensive. "Can I be frank with you?"

There's nothing I wanted more. "Please."

She took a deep breath before releasing it in long bouts. It took a minute before her words came out. "I knew a love match would be unlikely. And my father's taste in men was...clinical. But I had such faith that a man could love me, and I'd have that white picket fence life that I'd read so much about. That all-encompassing love that I read in my stories. What I didn't know was that my marriage would be an emblematic alliance—a gesture.

"As soon as I found that out, I left behind all my ideas of a future husband who would be a sane or loveable man. Although it devastated me, I prayed that he would be absent. Careless. So, at the very least I could play a doting housewife and pretend that I had it all even if it was in solitary misery. If it were in exchange for a free life? Out from under any man's thumb? I'd take it." She nodded, sadly. It was obvious these words were said to not only convince me but also herself.

"A marriage just in name." I added, hoping to prompt her to say more. Marriage wasn't something that I had on my radar, love was a pressure point that exposed people to their weaknesses. Publicly declaring that through a certificate signed in law was plain dumb.

"Then Logan Novelli showed up." She continued. "And well, you've seen him, he's a clutchy, handsy motherfucker who wanted an obedient little wife with doe eyes that

never left his body out of lust and admiration. I leaned into it for a while, but his touch disgusted me. It wasn't love, it was lust, and it scared me. After that, I refused to have much contact with him until our wedding. I begged my father to stay in the room with me when he was around. Didn't stop him though. His wandering hands branded me publicly, a fact that he revelled in while I cringed.

“I thought my fear of him was only rooted in the fact that I didn't like him, that he was an asshole. Plain and simple. I thought that was all, but...”

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Her feet dragged along the ground, collecting foliage and slowing our pace. She shivered then, so I shrugged my leather jacket off to drape it over her shoulders, hoping that my residual heat would warm her quicker.

Each step she took looked like a struggle, but she was a resilient girl who never hesitated, although I wished her to.

“Laney, we can stop,” I said in sympathy. “It’s okay.”

“Nothing about this is okay.”

No, I didn’t mean—

But she kept speaking. “After an ingenuine exchange of vows, he took me to the bedroom above where the reception was being held. He looked giddy. I’d heard rumours of the bloody sheet tradition the Italians had but I refused to entertain it. Tilly would’ve told me.”

Oh no. I didn’t want to hear what came next.

“Logan had been with girls before. He felt me up often. But this time, he pawed at my breasts under my clothing and dipped his hand lower to check if I was wet. I wasn’t. I tried to convince myself that I wanted it. Love and sex. But I wasn’t into it, and I couldn’t understand why I felt nothing for him. And I thought it was just because I didn’t want Logan or that my idea of love and lust were wrong, but when he got his dick out and I told him to just get it over with, I knew it was something different. He only got the tip in when I screamed.”



“Stop, stop, you don’t have to,” I pleaded. I couldn’t take this anymore. Hearing her pain pained me in an unexpected way. I didn’t yet feel close to this girl, but I certainly felt for her.

Tears welled in her eyes, but none fell as her eyes begged me to listen. I prepared for the worst. “You can say it.”

“I was consumed by an innate feeling of wrongness. And I knew I needed to get out of that situation, but I stayed transfixed and frozen. Breathing heavily, I couldn’t accurately distinguish up from down. Slurring my words so much that even the paramedics couldn’t figure out the cause. Father put me in isolated counselling, he wanted an answer for my breakdown.”

It felt like the moment in a movie where the director yelled cut just before a pivotal scene to insert a minor storyline about an insignificant side character. And I was a fool for it. I waited not so patiently for her following words.

“It took a while for me to realise. But I always knew.” She shrugged. “It wasn’t me. It didn’t just feel wrong because I didn’t want him. It was because I didn’t want a man.”

The fact of the matter didn’t shock me. Somehow even at St James’s I knew she was gay, I never would’ve expected her not to know, and certainly not to realise it in such a way.

“That’s one hell of a coming out story.”

“Believe me, it wasn’t as exciting in the moment.” She breathed into a laugh.

“Why didn’t you realise it before?”

We stood stock still, distantly aware of the deep haunting woods that surrounded us,

but eyes on each other. She squeezed the sides of my jacket to wrap herself further. I needed to get us out of here asap.

“In my world,” She looked down. “Relationships are a social pawn. It rarely crossed my mind that I could do something other than what was expected of me. Call it comphet or the status quo. I never thought I’d have the chance to explore sexuality beyond my family. I didn’t know girls were an option.”

I faintly began to nod.

“Not until it stared me in the face. Not sure Logan got the memo though.”

“Men are clueless about the pleasures of a woman,” I quipped.

“Amen, sister.” She chuckled in response, leaning her head intoxicatingly close to mine. In the movement, our noses almost touched.

I turned on my heel to walk back to the church and cleared my throat to ask, “How did he react?”

“Logan or Father?”

“Both, either.”

“I went to mental health counselling afterwards. I never told Logan directly, just quietly signed the annulment, though, I think he hopes I’m bi or something because he somehow still thinks he’s got a chance. And my father hasn’t really mentioned it since I told him. He’s accepted it in his own way.” She nodded. “I think.” seventeen days. seventeen fucking days.

“He did have a ‘what are your intentions with my daughter?’ conversation with me.”

“What! No way.” She giggled, and I was happy to hear that sound.

“Yup, when you were ignoring my knocking for the second night in a row.”

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“Aw man, I missed it,” she pouted. Her eyes were still red rimmed, but I was glad colour had returned to her face.

We finished the rest of the walk in comfortable silence.

“How do we get back?” I asked as we approached the road.

“Neenan will be here.”

“You texted him?”

“No.” She shrugged. “He’s my personal guard.”

“You...need a guard?” I looked at her confused, taking quick peaks at the ankle from which she had pulled a knife earlier.

“More like a protective wall between me and danger.”

The crunch of tyres on gravel caught my attention as a black SUV rolled onto the road.

“Told you,” Laney said, walking toward the car's back door where Neenan already stood with the door open. She gave me a knowing look as she slammed the door.

Smug motherfucker.

Chapter 13

LANEY

I admired her muscular legs as she slid into the backseat beside me. A weight that I had carried with me, that had felt like it was halfway fossilised, was finally lifted. Kenna might just about be the only person who could fully comprehend my experience. It filled my heart with an edge of confidence I previously lacked.

But as Neenan started the engine of the SUV and the church came into full view, I yelled. “Stop!”

They both looked at me with concern, but I clambered out the car, heading toward the church again. All my attention had been on myself. About Logan and me, and then about Kenna and me that I forgot who this day was truly for.

Tilly.

When I reached her casket, I fell to my knees. Everybody had left. They left her, alone in a cold church. That thought alone brought tears to my eyes.

Neenan and Kenna hung back by the entrance, although I could still feel their eyes on me.

“Oh Tilly,” my tears already morphed into sobs, “I’m so sorry. You didn’t deserve it— you didn’t deserve me coming into your life like a threat. I was going to tell you about a girl the day you died. You would’ve loved to hear about it, but you’d still roll your eyes as if it were teenage melodrama.” I chuckled through my tears. “We all miss you. You even got your father to finally hug your mother. It was devastating. Truly I— My world is bleak— I just—loved you and I need you. My girl, please—I.”

I stood and went to lift the lid of the casket off.

“Please, don’t,” I heard behind me, but it was not loud enough to register fully in my brain. No, because the revealed sight before me filled my head with screaming. Tilly’s skin was almost translucently white, and her hair was scattered neatly around her face. I tucked a piece of it behind her ear—only the left side, like she always had it.

I cried again.

“I’m sorry.” I continued, lowering my voice to a whisper, she heard my every private thought in life, it was only right that in death she knew my thoughts were of her. “I miss you already and promise you will never be forgotten. Georgia was wonderfully strong, I just wanted you to know that. The beautiful girl will take on your life and brighten the world with it. And no one will hurt you again, I made sure of it.”

My thoughts turned dark as I remembered the feel of blood spray collecting on my hand and dripping to the floor. It felt so much like the tears that fell now. My next words struggled to form on my tongue, but I had to leave her with my deepest darkest secret. Like best friends do. I dropped a kiss to her chilled hair, and said, “I killed for you.”

Suddenly, anonymous hands guided me back to the car. The warm hand that caressed my back was the same as in that school bathroom all those years ago. I revelled in the contact as I ducked to sit in the backseat.

In a quick motion, I stopped Kenna from closing my car door, instead, I jumped up to give her a quick peck on the lips before I collapsed back into my seat.

It wasn’t the right moment. God, it wasn’t even the right day or week. Without using words, I needed to say, ‘thank you’, and for some idiotic reason I thought that was the way. The girl didn’t even like me. I’m only here to get her off, I’m sure. But I didn’t believe it. Her jacket was around my shoulders.

Yet, I knew nothing about her.

First name and surname, yes. Brute strength, sure. But her family? Her background? No. Her feelings? Even less. It irked me. As the car rumbled to life again, my thoughts became louder. It wasn't just about information, it was about trust, and I had trusted her with my anxieties, my fears and feelings and she gave me...nothing.

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I'd given much more than she gave and if I wanted to keep her in my life, she better earn her place. Too often have I rushed to fantasise about the end when I never even asked questions at the beginning. Intimacy wasn't a shared experience, it was trust.

"Poor girl. I'm sorry for your loss, she must've been—" Kenna tried to say.

"Where do you come from?" She wouldn't earn my trust so easily. A saviour's act fooled me once, but I'm not a fool twice. I won't let myself. I needed to know something. Anything about her so that I wasn't in an informational deficit.

Her eyebrows furrowed before she answered. "Bilham, South Yorkshire."

"You don't have the accent?" I challenged. There was something I didn't all the way trust in her polished stature.

"I was homeschooled, and often confined to the needs of the family business. I didn't get out much."

"Homeschooled, really? Don't lie to me." I narrowed my eyes.

"I'm not, swear to God." There was something clinical in her responses. Obtuse. She defended her lie.

"Who taught you then?"

"My mother when I was younger, my father as I got older."



“What was your favourite subject in school?”

Her gaze darkened at that. “History.” There was an ominous edge to the word.

“Okay, okay,” I stumbled, remembering and working all the information in my head. I couldn’t think on my feet. “You have siblings?”

“Brothers.”

“How many?”

“Two.” She unbuckled her seatbelt.

“They nice?”

“They’re brothers.”

“Hmm,” I hesitated, I didn’t know anything about that.

“I’m going to kiss...”

Huh? “Who?”

“You.”

Then, she pounced.

Chapter 14

KENNA

The kiss was clumsy at first, but I grasped her chin to command the kiss, and I sank deeply into her warmth. My tongue coaxed for hers to meet mine. Give me your all, princess.

I'd feel guilty for the distraction if it wasn't for the way that I dropped my hand from her chin to loosely wrap around her neck. My fingers grazed her pulse point as I held her still. Her heart rate spiking further at the touch. Oh, you like it? Good.

“Don't be kissing in the backseat.” Neenan's plea cut through the bubble of heat we'd created. A good boy shouldn't get what he wants, so I switched gears into a full on make out sesh. I grabbed her hip, fisting the fabric of her dress so that it would lift a little and she'd be flush with my chest. “No Frenching in my backseat. Laney?!”

That got her out of it.

Bastard.

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I leaned back into my side of the car and held my index finger between my teeth as I watched her. Inappropriate behaviour, Kk.

She pulled away, violently, suddenly apologetic. “Sorry, sorry, sorry.” She muttered, becoming flustered but not in a good way. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

The resounding silence crushed me as blood pumped through my veins at the same rate as Laney’s rapid breathing. Lust wasn’t going to solve this. All my life, I trusted that in the wake of tragedy the dopamine rush from sex would heal the soul, or at least make me forget for a little while. But that wasn’t the case for Laney, I realised. That was likely her second or third kiss. The gravity of such a moment shouldn’t taint the memorial of her best friend. I blew it.

Right person, wrong time.

What she needed now was what she had always sought for. Comfort.

The rest of the car ride was spent without a single word, but I extended an arm along the backseat and fiddled with a lock of her hair. We were close but not touching, and while Neenan and I seemed to grow more relaxed, Laney continued to writh her hands together with her head down.

“Princess,” I whispered across the car. The snap of her head was an admission in itself as she looked at me. “Calm.”

“No, I—” Her tone screamed anxiety, my pulse thrummed by it.

“Sir Ravencroft will be waiting,” Neenan interjected.

“What? Why?” I asked them both but kept my eyes on Laney.

“Questions need answers in the Ravencroft family.” He said. He wasn’t the one I wanted these words from though, but he kept rattling on. “The Logan thing, the disappearing, the kiss probably.”

“Do not tell him.” I shot a glare at the back of his head. Nothing good could come from Richard Ravencroft’s involvement. His hubris alone would send me a thousand miles away from her if I dared to dip a toe in Laney’s personal life pool.

“Oh, I think he already knows.”

“How could he possibly?” I mocked. We approached the iron gates of the Ravencroft Estate, and dread began to set in.

“You don’t stab a man for no reason, Kenna. He wasn’t born yesterday. He had love too.” Had? LOVE?

I scoffed. “I’ll deal with him.” I’ll show him.

“Then, you don’t know where you fall on the pecking order.” He shook his head. And that was what I feared. I’d gotten too close and would lose it all. Mama forbade me from volunteering for this mission, saying that I was too involved to see through clear water, but I promised it was purely physical.

Getting my first taste of Laney further entrenched my obsession, but my timing may have ruined it all.

The car drew to a stop in front of the ivy clung manor house.

As I glanced to my right, I saw Laney's eyes were sealed shut. "Okay," she spouted all of a sudden, overcome with some new spark of confidence, but when she smiled, I knew it was faked.

She opened her own door and strode toward the front door.

When I got out of the car, Neenan came fast approaching and gripped my upper arm. "Do not hurt her," He gritted out. His grip tightened at my silence. "Understood?"

I nodded.

"Verbal."

"Yes. Understood." But fear seeped into my heart as if there were vines wrapping around an intruding object. Even when he had let go, I was frozen in place.

I was going to hell.

?

Later that night, voices came through the bedroom wall. It was muffled but growing in volume as if it were getting closer.

"Divorce is not an option this time."

"I don't want him. Father, please."

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“Sunshine, which is it? You like him but you scream when he gets close? You two seemed pretty close in the church until you stabbed him. A clear cut, you know. Good girl.”

“I was getting away from him. Kenna saved me. You sat there doing nothing as he fawned over me.”

“So, it’s Kenna that you want? You were in that forest long enough, you fuck her?” My ear touched the cold stoned walls.

“Father!” She sounded appalled. “I was having an anxiety attack because my best friend was in a casket and my ex-husband couldn’t keep his dirty hands to himself long enough so that I could say my goodbyes. This is not about my want.”

“Don’t give me that attitude. I spent thousands to get you help. And I spent years getting you a good match. You ruined it. I won’t let you ruin it again.”

A slammed door shook the walls to my bedroom. After a few minutes, heavy footfalls receded down the hallway and Laney’s door clicked open before a knock sounded at my door.

The sigh of relief I released delayed my reaction before I swung the door open.

“You heard?” She said, teary eyed.

I nodded, sadly. “Everything.” And opened the door wider for her to come inside.

And she did and with an ungraceful flop, she fell onto my bed, face first. Please, let this day be over, please, let this day be over could be heard muffled by the bedsheets.

For me, I didn't want it to end just yet. She came to me. She came to me. I'm usually the one in her domain, but she sought comfort in me. There wasn't a bigger compliment than that. Maybe, I hadn't lost her after all, though I knew she was still suspicious, I vowed to protect her above all else.

It was a weirdly foreign sight to see her in my space, cloaked in the darkness of my burgundy bed sheets and dim lighting. I'd spent a lot of my life underground, sometimes literally, so it helped to acclimate my eyes to low light just in case. It made for an intimate setting.

I laid down beside her, on my side, facing her, but all I could see was the dark blonde of her hair sprawled around her head. Fingering a couple strands, it took an effort to just slide the silk through my hand instead of tightening a fist and pulling her back and making her mine.

I refrained for now. It had been a taxing day. Emotions and tensions collided into a hurricane, but it was the unspoken truths unclothed that made the day worthwhile despite it. Laney's honesty had been a surprise. A welcome one, but still unexpected when her voice spitting "liar" continued to ring in my ears.

My hand cupped the back of her head in a gentle caress. I looked at it often in secondary school. It was the only view I was allowed to examine. The other times, the times I could see her face, she always returned my gaze. My mission was to authenticate her identity. We knew that her father might put her in school sooner or later, so we installed alerts for new pupils with suspicious backgrounds. And bingo, we got their location. And me? A year-long obsession.

I dropped my hand.

Laney groaned in protest. “No, keep going.” She tilted her head to the side, the side I was sitting on, and almost seared into me a command to comply.

“And what do you say?” I teased in a mocking voice using the type of tone an entitled aunt would use to prompt a random child to show her respect she didn’t earn.

“Please,” she said, her doe eyes focused full throttle on me but immediately closed when I returned my hand to the same spot on her head. A girl could get used to this.

I shifted my hand from her head to rub her shoulders.

She cooed at the affection.

Deciding I needed to use both hands to give the best massage, I straddled her back and lightly placed my arse to rest against hers. With hands on either side, I dug my thumbs in deep, moving them slowly in a circular motion. As I did, I felt her breathe below me and the tension ease from her shoulders.

God, I wanted to be under her. She could reign my kingdom.

The circular movement of my thumbs moved my hands lower and lower down her back forcing me to straddle her on her upper legs. Her arse in full view now and she stiffened. I hovered for a minute, but she didn’t try to buck me off.

In a seductive tone, I whispered close to her ear, “Relax, princess,” as I continued massaging her ass and upper thighs. I continued lower down her legs in serene silence all the way to the tips of her toes.

When I looked up at her again, she was softly snoring.

Chapter 15



## LANEY

Kenna and I fell into a routine. Every night she came to visit me in my room. We never went back into her room after I woke up there the day after Tilly's funeral, disorientated, alone, but wickedly calm.

The kiss had come at a terrible time, but I couldn't bring myself to regret it. As soon as it happened, I wanted to wrestle my phone out of my pocket and call my best friend. The reality that sunk in immediately after left me with a bitter taste. Not on account of Kenna, but circumstance. I hated that she had to be muddled by the tragedy that had befallen the Ravencroft syndicate. If only we'd met again the year before.

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We threw each other silent glances during the day but it was only at night that our mouths started running. And I mean both in the talking sense, and the kissing sense. Though, I wished for more. Never in my life had I felt more validated and confident of my sexuality as now. I ached for that next step of intimacy, and I wanted it with Kenna. I almost panted at the thought.

I had snuck down to the service maids' quarters to find some candles and a lighter in preparation for tonight. But I got accosted by Grant, who ran in my direction, commanding that I take over the last hour of training as he had just received word of a situation with his daughter.

For sympathies sake, I had withheld my eye roll, but my romantic plans were put on the backburner as it had done my entire life so far. The only reprieve of this was that I could have an hour to gawk at Kenna, unabashedly. What? I'm only doing my job. Supervising!

Grant hadn't told me, however, that the last lesson of the day was gun handling. The very sight of them made me uncomfortable, not to mention the sounds and smell that would stick with me for a while. I loathed the mark it would leave.

Heads turned when I walked in the room, and I hoped they couldn't sense the tremors of anxiety that I concealed just below my skin. I found Kenna instantly, looking relaxed, shoulders back, and legs spread in a confident stance. Her calm calmed me, so I mimicked her, channelling her courage as if it were my own.

The weapon of choice today was a simple handgun.

I cleared my throat loudly to the group. “This.” I lifted a gun in the air, the rattle of a clip thankfully missing. “This is a Colt-911 handgun. Do not point at anything you don’t intend to shoot. On this premise, gun handling and aiming must be done with appropriate clearance. Today is practice, you have my permission.” I asserted, with a booming voice. “Before you are handed a gun, I will assess your outward capability. I trust you are confident in this role as you have been hired in it, but this kind of weapon must be treated with serious caution. If I catch even a smirk on your face, you will be asked to leave.” I ended my spiel with a nod and hoped for no trouble in this session. I didn’t often trust men, yet, I had to have faith that these men would listen to my word. “Line up!”

The first guy in line appeared giddy, bouncing from foot to foot. “Nope,” I said and pointed toward the door. His shoulders slumped, softened eyes hard on mine for me to reconsider. Fat chance. “Please, leave.”

The second guy walked slowly. He was buff and, without wavering, extended a hand to place a weapon in it. “Position one,” I told him and pointed toward the row of targets along the wall.

As I moved down the line of men, I was keenly aware that Kenna had placed herself at the back of the queue. Two cadets were sent away. Eight were given the go ahead.

I looked the final cadet up and down, unabashed.

“Saving the best till last?” She joked but with a severe look on her face while accepting the gun I had placed in her hand.

Her eyes seemed to light up at the weight of the thing. I cringed. Her exuberant confidence was one thing behind closed doors, but it was dangerous in combat. I trusted her. I think. Don’t make me regret this.

“Position ten.” I directed.

She hadn’t yet looked up from the weapon. When she did, I melted. “Okay, Miss,” she replied in a whisper.

It took me too long to compose myself. I raised my voice in faux confidence. “Alright, target practice is about posture and positioning more than aim. Observe my stance and assume the right position, right foot forward...”

After a series of instructional demonstrations, the line of cadets stood in position, ready to shoot. I had given each of them only one bullet, so the aim had to be good.

“Ear protectors and glasses on! On ‘shoot’. Ready?”

I counted down.

Three.

Two.

One.

Shoot.

I flinched at the sound of ten gunshots bouncing off each wall. My ears began to ring despite my protective headgear, and I so badly wanted to be anywhere else.

When the dust settled and the cadets could assess their shots, a chorus of reactions filled the room. Some boasting, others let out a big sigh. But Kenna was quiet. I walked toward her to see where her shot landed. A fraction of an inch away from the bullseye. Damn.

I looked at her then. She was in a leather jacket again, with black cargo trousers and a white vest that clung to her breasts and skin. Her hair was half tied up at the back and loose silver chains hung from her ear, similar to the ones that swung from the loop of her jeans.

“Almost.” I said and I handed her a single bullet for the next round of target practice before turning on my heel to go down the line to distribute the ammunition again. Even when I announced the second round, I still grimaced at the noise.

Many improved on the second go but looking toward Kenna’s target I spotted the margin of error again as the shot missed the bullseye by less than an inch.

So, before round three, I came up behind her and moulded my body to her back, leg to leg, arm on arm, and both our fingers on the trigger. Her eyes followed the slight adjustments I made to her posture. I was going to ensure success for her.

It wasn’t entirely selfless, though, I revelled in her warmth and breathed in her fresh perfume. “Ensure you align your dominant eye with the position of your gun. Like this.” I nudged her arm a fraction to the right, centring her stance.

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As I went to unpeel myself from her, she flipped our fingers and arms in a sudden motion so that her finger and arms were on top of mine, in command and in control. It was unnerving, undoubtedly a power play but man, was it sexy with Kenna in charge.

“Countdown,” she whispered in my ear.

I trusted her implicitly. The numbers came out rushed, and before I even said ‘one,’ she pulled the trigger.

Bullseye.

I need a cold shower.

Kenna chuckled while letting me go. I’m confused for a second until I realised that I had said that aloud!

I cleared my throat. When I took five steps away from her, I could finally breathe normally again. “That was the last round, guys. Well done.” Walking the line behind the cadets, I perused the scattered bullet holes in the target. I nodded to myself, oddly proud. For someone who hated guns, that wasn’t such a bad outcome. “Please, place your handguns on the table in front of me when you leave. Barrel facing away from me, thank you.”

I could feel her body behind me after the final cadet had left.

“I love it when you blush,” she admitted under her breath.

“I like you in charge,” I returned.

“Can be arranged.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Tonight?”

“Uh-uh.” Without another word, I grabbed her hand and dragged her across the hallway to my office. The few people that were still around were packing up to grab dinner from the mess, eyes toward their desks instead of watching my fingers tangled with Kenna’s, or both our chest rising heavily.

The air became thick once the door shut, and my movements slowed as a result. Kenna’s didn’t though. She was quick to spin me so that I had my back to the door we had just entered through, and she leaned her weight into me, nipping at my ear.

“You want dominance, princess?” She whispered in a sultry voice.

All the emulated confidence dissipated as words got stuck in my throat. I could only gulp and nod in response.

She cocked her head to the side, “What do you say?”

“Please,” I breathed out almost into a moan and I looked down, embarrassed at my squirming.

At once, she gripped my chin between her finger and her thumb, sharply turning my head in line with hers. We were so close. I could feel the steady beat of her chest, her breathing calm, unlike mine.

She held my face until I lifted my eyes to hers. I held the contact for a long moment, but I was truly desperate. Being touch starved for so long, and finally coming in arms reach of it had me in a frenzy. The chemistry in my brain may be scattered but my thoughts were simple, fuck me.

The second she saw it in my eyes, she pounced. Her hands found my hips as her mouth attacked mine. It was headless, but in a way majestic as she lifted me up to circle my legs around her hips.

She had power. I loved it.

I pushed at her jacket to get it off, but her arms were tightly wound around my waist, keeping me safely airborne that the frenzied effort was fruitless. Still, I touched every inch of exposed skin I could under her jacket. God, her skin was soft. The armoured smell of gunpowder clung to her, and raised the temperature in this small, confined space to a hundred degrees.

Our kiss had morphed into a wet interwoven pattern of our tongues clashing. It was like we both were satisfied at the proximity that we were quickly gaining. It had to be closer faster.

That was until Kenna threw me down onto my office chair, effectively knocking all my breath out of me, but as quickly as my back hit the chair, she was on top of me. Her tongue in my mouth. I was panting hard, trading oxygen for more of her.

In this position, I managed to push her jacket off her and with it, the straps of the black camisole she was wearing underneath. I pulled back to catch my breath and got



full sight of her, dishevelled and so fucking hot. She was wearing a red, lacy bra. It was almost see-through as her breasts hung in my face, and I moaned at the sight. She hadn't barely touched me yet!

This moment of reprieve had me recalibrating my state of undress too. My jacket was long gone by the door, the top two buttons on my jeans were undone, and I wasn't wearing underwear.

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Kenna hadn't seemed to notice that yet as she prompted me to lift my arms for her to rip my shirt off of me. Her eyes were laser-focused, it was kind of scary, but I abided by her instructions and held my arms up. I could tell the exact moment she saw me, sans underwear, because she paused.

"That for me?" She said.

I shaved.

"Everything is for you," I responded. It was a lie. The day after Tilly's funeral, I had an intense need to feel clean. I was scrubbing profusely on my body in the shower and thought the hair would have to go to, but I didn't tell her that. I'll make her feel special.

She tilted her head back and groaned at my words, before sliding her hands into my jeans and pulling them clean off.

I spread my legs and shifted my hips to get closer to the edge of the chair, easier access, but she slapped me right in the pussy instead. It was cruel, unexpected, but I felt a small gush of wetness puddle between my legs.

"Don't look so eager yet, I'm still fully clothed." Bitch.

My hands sprung outward, fisting fabrics on her body to pull her closer. "Don't make me wait." I pleaded with her.

"Only good girls get a reward," she replied. She pulled away from me then, and my

entire body almost moved with her, but she placed a hand between my breasts to push me back down.

She peeled her tight cargo trousers off and her cami but left her underwear on before straddling me on the chair. I could orgasm from just her physique as I admired the toned abs that she usually hid under her tight fitting tops. Her eyes were dark, but I was undeterred as I slid my hands down both her sides, caressing gently in admiration.

She stared at my body, seeming to revel in the power position that I had given her. I grew increasingly more lethargic at her proximity, but I was also desperate for her touch, so I bucked into her to get her to move or do something.

In a swift motion, she gripped one of my breasts, hard, locating the nipple before she sharply twisted it. I almost screamed and moaned at the same time, but her other hand flew to my mouth, blocking the noise from escaping.

“We’ve got to be quiet; can you do that for me princess?”

Unable to speak, I gave her a firm nod as I met her eye.

Her hand then travelled down my neck to my chest, briefly tickling my nipple before finding my pussy swollen and gently, slotting one finger inside.

My back bent at the insertion.

“Oh, she likes that,” Kenna said, more to herself than anyone else, but she didn’t move the finger inside me. “I’m going to make you come so hard, you won’t remember your name.”

I panted underneath her, willing her to move, almost begging her to.

She leaned over me further, the chair reclining further back at her movement. Her boobs came into contact with my face.

“Suck,” she commanded and curled her finger inside me.

I keeled forward and my mouth latched onto one of her breasts. I sucked hard, hoping that she would reward me, but she just moaned herself. The sound took me by surprise. It was vulnerable and amped up our intimacy.

Letting go of her nipple, I kissed and sucked around it in the hope of leaving marks—a declaration for other people to see that Kenna Whether was mine. My mouth moved to her other breast and gave it equal attention.

Then, Kenna withdrew her finger and for a moment I felt empty. I couldn’t see what she was doing as she entirely blocked my sightline, but quickly something cool and hard touched my intimate skin.

There was a click and then, this foreign object penetrated me. It was much larger than her finger, but by now I was wet enough to take it efficiently despite its chill.

I tried to look between our bodies, but Kenna tutted disapprovingly. Only good girls get a reward so a good girl I will be.

Still, I writhed and willed Kenna to move the object inside me.

“This is to get you as wet as possible,” she explained. “Most of the pleasure is in your clit, I haven’t forgotten about it.”

I blushed. Obviously, my sexual inexperience was clear as day but if she minded, she didn’t show it. Instead, she leaned down to kiss my jaw. I tried to return similar kisses to whatever skin I could reach, yet it was clumsy, and I still bucked my hips to get

some kind of release from the pressure in my pussy.

As Kenna bent to lay warm wet marks on my skin, I had a clear line of sight to the offending object that sat in my pussy right now.

I gasped. It was a gun.

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“You can’t– I–” I tried to protest, but Kenna just pushed it further in and I quickly lost my train of thought at the sweet friction. “Oh my god,” I sighed.

“The safety is on,” she assured me and jumped down from the chair to continue the wet trail that began at my jaw. She kissed my stomach, my hips and my thighs but conveniently avoided the area I needed her most.

“Please,” I was flustered as something akin to butterflies swarmed in my lower belly. When Kenna’s breath skimmed my pussy, I shivered, my entire body wound so tight from the relentless teasing.

“This is our first time,” she said, softly, “Gotta make it count.” She kissed my clit with a quick peck.

I was only focused on her. Sounds disappeared and the threat that someone, anyone, could walk in at any time entirely dissipated.

She placed a heavy hand on my lower stomach eliciting a deep, pained moan from my lips.

“Shh. I’ll make it better, promise princess.” Returning to kissing my thighs again, I pushed my head back in frustration. This was a sweet bloody torture.

Every couple of seconds, she would tap the gun handle. It made my heart rate jump each time. Until finally, she pumped the gun three times, bringing me almost to the cresting point, before pulling out altogether.

My wetness dripped from the gun, and I watched as Kenna licked it clean.

She briefly inserted two fingers to collect some more and spread it around my pussy lips and up to my clit, giving it a couple of circles that made me see stars before lifting her fingers to my mouth and commanding me to 'lick'.

As soon as my lips wrapped around her fingers, she suctioned my clit into her mouth. And my stringent patience was weaning as my chest fell heavier with each passing second.

She lifted the gun, bringing it to my entrance again, but barely penetrating. "Don't come yet, princess," she commanded.

Her mouth returned to my clit, and I grunted a loud, "please." But she just sucked harder and moved the handgun with shallow strokes. There was a countdown in my head, and I was nearing number one. I felt like I could implode.

Something told me she was never going to give me permission so as I came to the precipice, I roughly slid my fingers into her hair and held her face to my pussy as I came all over her.

I bucked a few times, but my grip never loosened on her head until I felt the last wave of an orgasm crash through me. I was barely cognizant, but I heard Kenna's quiet words.

"What's your name?"

"Princess," I mumbled.

"Good girl."

When I finally let go, Kenna fell back against a filing cabinet on the floor.

I, on the other hand closed my eyes and focused on steadying my breathing.

We lapsed into a moment of silence. Though, I felt her watching me, collapsed and spent in the chair. I was too satiated to care about how that looked.

Eventually, when I did open my eyes, Kenna had a smug smile on her face. She was already dressed again as if nothing had happened. I sat up to find my jeans and top again. The draft from under the door caused a chill to spread through me.

I opened and closed my mouth before words tumbled out. “That was...” I exhaled, but then I looked over at her and realised, “What about you?!” In a kind of shock. It’s not fair that I got all the big, incredible orgasm, we had sex together.

Still, she smiled. “Don’t worry about me, I took my pleasure too.” When I looked confused, she continued. “I got myself off, Laney. You made a wonderful mess.”

“Oh God,” I said with a smile. And I sent a quiet prayer that there were no hidden surveillance cameras in this room.

?

Shortly after, we returned to my bedroom. As we always did.

She listened to my rambling and musings, and we read together snuggled on my bed. With both our eyes on the page, I combed my fingers through her hair absentmindedly, perfectly content to just feel its softness and be in her company. Yet, at the back of my mind existed a thought that had been nagging me for days now.

There is still so much I don’t know about Kenna. I had spilled my guts to this girl,



gave her my first orgasm from another person, cried in front of her three times, but still, she hadn't been forthcoming with me.

The question popped out before I could stop it. "Why don't you tell me things as I do with you?"

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She gave me a funny look, I wasn't usually this bold. "Do you not like me as I am?"

"No, I do. I just think there's more to know about you. Like...what is your family like?"

She swallowed and looked down. "My family wasn't the nicest to me. I will spare you the details."

"No!" I asserted louder than I meant, "I'd like to know the details?"

She looked me in the eyes, her eyes growing soft despite her earlier apprehension. "Princess, some things are not for sharing. The weight of such confessions are not carried alone."

"I know. My mother died in childbirth. Every year my father mourns more. My birthday is a burden." Kenna turned and opened her arms to me, and I fell into her warmth. While we had had sex, this was the first time we'd been genuinely intimate. I made sure to treasure it.

After a couple minutes of silence, Kenna confessed a morsel of personal detail. "When I was younger, my father and brothers used to drag me out of bed at night, tell me to grab a blanket and we'd lay on the trampoline watching the stars. Sometimes, I still go out at night to watch the sky. It's those memories that I'd like to remember. Not the bad ones."

KENNA

Jesus Christ, I'm in too deep. I'm in too deep. Ten days until the funeral.

For years I had equated attachment to weakness. Dad drilled it in my head before I could even cohesively form a sentence to refute it. Family came first, don't grow attached to something that could compete with that. Laney knew as best as I did that loss comes easy in organised crime, I feared what would happen if I lost her.

I was naive to think I could get over her.

The thought sobered me up. Tension and grief weighed down the air on the estate, but I had to physically force the giddy smile off my face. It had been plastered across my face for almost a week, I feared I was going to get wrinkles from it.

It was only ever meant to be sex. How did we get here?

Our usual song and dance continued this week until a note appeared in my locker after another disciplinary run.

On the note was an inscription in dainty cursive letters.

Skip lunch today.; meet me by the firepit!

L xx

It made me smile again. Attachments were pressure points that could easily be exploited, but boy, was it a joy to be captured by it. This was all new to me. I only allowed myself lust without strings, but Laney had shown me that I wanted to be completely wrapped up in those strings. I couldn't keep my eyes off her.

It was why I now wondered when she had the time to deliver this note. Laney had been sitting with her father on the small balcony when I returned from my run, so she must have written it quickly.

I'd never received such a message before, and honestly, speaking in code was a kind of foreplay in my eyes. Stuffing the note in my bra, I moved to the IT room for my final week of training—finally, a desk with a computer on it.

I could almost scream with relief. Surveillance was my favourite kind of enforcement, no good operation in the modern day was complete without it.

After the fire, my family lost all their income. We managed to retain relationship with some private drug and arms dealers but those were few and far between to conserve our identity when we went underground. Our names weren't on any census data, no phone numbers were in our names, and we had sparse access to Wi-Fi. It's why I never had a proper education, and it was why I was thrilled to have high tech, expensive as fuck, equipment in front of me.

But it didn't seem others shared the same excitement as me at this prospect. There were notable gaps in attendance as Forrester Waite led the session. It confused me, until Sir Waite addressed my question.

“Some of your fellow cadets are held back for further questioning. You, too, will be called for interrogation soon, but Miss Laney has affirmed your loyalty to me as the most trusted members so far of your group. Security is of the utmost importance, especially in these trying times, no word of information discussed today will leave this room or risk condemnation in the dungeon below our feet. Walking free is not an option after this.”

I gulped and pushed my shoulders back, but I was inwardly blushing at Laney's assessment of me. Though, I shouldn't be surprised, I was sleeping with the boss after

all.

As if I summoned her with my mind, she walked through the door in dark jeans, a ribbed camisole and a blue sport jacket. I came to learn this was her preferred loungewear for long days at the office, and my assumption was greenlit as she moved toward the direction of her office.

Our eyes met as she traversed the room. I wasn't the only one staring, but I was the only one to receive a knowing look. I'll see you later. Then, faded from view.

"God, the boss's daughter is hot." One guy whispered to another.

"Almost creamed my pants at target practice each time she commanded us to shoot." He stroked his chin suggestively.

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“Yeah, like I’ll shoot a load for ya, don’t worry darling.” They chuckled, hitting each other on the shoulder.

I rolled my eyes and moulded my face into a look of pure disgust. One of the guys saw me then.

“Oh, look she agrees, you’re welcome to join us, Kk.” He winked.

I turned away. “Assholes.” Instead, I casted my mind back to the visual of Laney in disarray, spent and wanting in her chair. Where she most likely placed her delectable ass now.

“Attention!”

My mind was too preoccupied with lunch to pay full attention to the session, but I understood the gist of it. You’re in too deep. Think about your family.

When we got dismissed, I charged for the backdoor leading to the Ravencroft gardens, which a guard had told me was a memorial for Laney’s late mother. But before I could turn toward the firepit, a hand gripped my upper bicep, and I was accosted by a man in black clothing. Well, I mean, neither the black attire nor the men were exactly rare, but it still shook me.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I yelped.

In a lower voice, he spoke close to my ear. “I need to speak with you. It’s urgent. You need to leave.”

“Excuse me—” I tugged my arm out of his grip. “Who do you think you are?”

“Doesn’t matter. This is turning into a hostile takeover. You are being blinded by grandeur, but it’s not safe, K.”

I shook my head in confusion. Did he...did he know? There were more people on this mission? This man was obviously given a redacted brief. We weren’t leaving again. “I’m not leaving,” I asserted.

“The organisation here is shoddy, soon to implode. It makes staying very dangerous. I advise you to make your move and get out. That’s an order.”

I tried hard not to shout. “What order? I don’t know you!” People were already looking and causing a scene was a sure fire way of getting myself placed in the interrogation room. I needed to delay that happening as long as I could.

His features dimmed at the declaration. He seemed dismayed but also weirdly hopeless, as if I were a lost cause. If anything, I now had a good reason to stay. And that reason was waiting in the woods for me.

“You don’t understand. You will not hear the marching of soldiers, they are silent killers.” He spoke in riddles.

“I understand very well,” I said, pushing my chest up. I didn’t have time for this nonsense. Since when did Dad hire imbeciles who’d give up justice for safety? That wasn’t my family motto. We’d waited too long for this. “And,” I continued, condescending, “I can be quiet.” I spun away from him and walked toward my target, my Laney, my primary reason for staying.

Before I left, I could faintly hear his final words. “Meet me in twenty minutes. Courtyard. Tell no one.” I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t intrigued, but I didn’t break my

stride toward Laney, though my mind seemed to have been left where he still stood.

My heart raced as I pushed through the garden toward the firepit, the urgency of the mysterious man's words clashing with my desire to see Laney. Duty and love were waging a war within me, each step echoing with the silent conflict. I tried to shake off the unease, focusing on Laney, my anchor in this tumultuous sea.

When I came to the clearing, she wasn't there, the coals cold and seemingly untouched for days. Where could she be? She promised.

I looked around me, rapidly, looking for any compressed grass that could indicate whether she came earlier, or perhaps, a second note showing me the path to her. But there was nothing.

Then, a reflected light caught my eye. In the distance, a figure sat on the stoop of the backdoor with a glass of water in hand. Her caramel blonde hair unmistakable in the sunlight. I released the breath I was holding.

"This isn't the firepit, princess." I said cheerily as I approached. She jumped at my words and when I saw the listless look on her face, I knew immediately something was wrong. "What happened?"

Surprise replaced her sad expression, her eyes wide as if she were taking me in. "Uh—nothing." She quickly defended, but I stayed silent. There was more. "Just, I haven't been sleeping very well and I feel a bit unwell, dizzy. I took medication for it, but it honestly made me feel worse."

"Is it the stress?"

"Or the grief, I don't know. These past couple weeks have been so unsteady."



Placing a firm hand on her back, I sat beside her and kissed her temple as she leaned into my side.

“How have you been handling it?”

She only shrugged. “I’m not sure what more I can handle.”

My thoughts strayed to the mysterious man that I spoke to. If he brought more stress to her or this operation, he’d regret it. She could sense my distraction.

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“Do you think you’ll ever tell me everything?” Laney asked eventually. “You come with me to bed, we read together, we train together, but still, it feels like I don’t even know you.”

I turned around, looking anywhere but at her, not saying anything. If stress was making her ill, I would withhold my encounter with the mysterious man. Worse still, I was certain my identity would crush her. I couldn’t have that. Not yet. Not ever.

“You’re not going to answer that?” Laney said. “You can’t answer nicely; I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it’s fine that you asked me. You don’t know how much you mean to me, or you wouldn’t think it’s too much to ask. But I have secrets, serious ones, and I can’t share them yet, even with you. The time is coming soon when you’ll know everything. You might think I’m cruel and selfish, but love is always selfish. The more intense it is, the more selfish it becomes.”

“You don’t have to say all that, it’s okay, you have other women. I just have you. It makes sense that you feel less than me.”

The rejection burned. She didn’t know how true it was. “That’s not it.”

“You’re obviously hiding something from me.” I went to argue but she stopped me. “Look, I know this world comes with secrecy, and I try not to be paranoid. Just...I want you to stay. And it not be a lie or a strategy.”

Tears shone in her eyes as they met mine. “Please.”

“I have to go.”

“Where to?”

“I can’t—”

“Another mystery.”

“I have to go.” I’m sorry.

She laughed through a sob. “Sure, duty calls!”

But I had already left. I knew that if she had just looked up at me, her eyes coated in a sheen of tears, I wouldn’t have moved. Mentally, I said a prayer and swore to make it up to her later.

Walking back toward the courtyard, it took me a minute to locate the man again, but his boot stuck out from under the treeline. We were at the front of the house, the most surveilled part of the estate in manpower but a blind spot for cameras. Smart man.

“Who are you really?” I rounded on him from behind.

“You’re late.”

I gave him a warning look as a response. His confidence around me was unnatural and surely a fallacy. To hide what, I didn’t know. He must’ve been away from the family for quite some time if he didn’t know how to address me with the authority of being his superior. Or at least more instrumental than him. When he didn’t continue, I kicked him in the shin. Pain was a great motivator.

“I’m Dylan’s brother.” He said, clearing his throat.

I scoffed and turned to leave, muttering, “I don’t listen to a traitor’s brother.”

“Don’t be coy, you know who I am.” He said, effectively stopping me in my tracks. Another one? Gritting my teeth, I listened to his next words. “And I know why you are really here. Keep your eyes on the big man, Kk.”

“I’m fine.” I spat.

“You’re not. Wait until your family finds out you got between her legs before you got into Richard’s head.”

“How do you...”

“I work security. I have access to the eyes and ears of every inch of this estate. Including your little...escapade with the boss’s daughter. Once they realise it, they’ll put you on the night shifts. Make you wary, exhausted. Break your spirit. Break your relationship.”

“I can handle it.”

“I know, but you don’t have to.” Against my better judgement, my feet stayed planted in place.

“No.” I said as I leaned in closer to him, menacing. “I won’t. You should never have dragged me into this, confronting me as if I wouldn’t know more than you. Are you stupid? You shouldn’t even be talking to me.”

“I wasn’t going to approach you, rest assured, I didn’t want to. But they murdered him, Kenna.” He spat my name as if it tasted like arsenic. “Have some goddamn respect.”

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Exasperated, I lifted my hands in the air and motioned to walk away.

“I’ll tell them.”

“Blackmail, huh?”

“Let me have a shot at Richard and I’ll keep your secret.”

This man was delusional. His brother was just as idiotic as him standing in front of me now. All that showed me was that they deserved their fates, Tilly did not, and I wasn’t about to be sympathetic toward such men.

“Your brother got what he gave. A brutal, unnecessary death.” I turned away. “Don’t speak to me again.”

“They are going to come for her.” He said softer than I had heard of him yet. “They are going to come for her, and you can’t do nothing about it.”

“You know nothing.” I could protect what was mine. It was so fragile and new that I didn’t have the words to explain it, but Laney was a fixture in my life now. There was no getting over her now that I had her, but he’s right, her surname was an obstacle that I don’t think my family could overcome.

“And you think you know everything?” He scoffed. “You’ve been here five minutes.”

My breathing became laboured. “Yeah, and I’m much closer to the target than you.”

“Ahh,” he replied. “So, that’s your play. You get to the girl to get to her father. Forgive me for not seeing it earlier.” His shoulders relaxed and suddenly, the threatening stature of his body was replaced with the loose movements of a young lad. He cocked his head to the side as he looked at me. “I like your game, K. But I was serious before, there’s brewing discontent in the rank-and-file men. Richard Ravencroft needs to be eliminated. I want to do it.”

“You can’t. It has to be me. Blood for blood.”

“That’s not fair, he stole my blood too!”

I masked my sigh of relief with exasperation. He thinks Richard did it.

?

It was dark before I got to her room. I yawned. Guilt and hope coursed through me as I approached her room—guilt for the change of routine and hope that I could sneak in quietly. It felt nice to be anticipated. Too often I had to conform for others, but not with her. With light steps, I pushed the door open. She always kept it unlocked for me.

“Should I be hanging garlic at the door?” Laney joked, sleep thick in her voice.

My gaze darkened as I looked down at her, coming to her bedside and leaning over where she lounged. “I won’t bite too hard, I promise,” I responded, my mouth latching on the skin just below her ear. I was tired but never too tired for her. Besides, she stayed up for me.

“Hmmm,” she groaned. “Promise to suck my tits, not my blood.”

“Deal,” I whispered, kissing a line down her chest and between her tits. Her chest

caving with each long exhale. “Feeling better?”

“I know something that would make me feel better.” That’s a no then. I was about to protest, but her hips rose to meet mine and any thoughts of her not being fine vanished from my mind to redirect me towards the continuing journey of exploration with my tongue.

“I’ll make you feel so good, princess.” I promised. Latching onto one of her nipples, I revelled at the deep moan she let out. My tongue swirled her hardened nipples exposed to the cool. I reached up both hands to fist and fawn at her soft tits. God, I loved touching her.

Even behind enemy lines, I knew I was in the right place at the right time.

Trailing lower down her stomach, I caught sight of some ink on her wrist. It was of the roman numerals V/V/MMI. Seemed she had secrets of her own. Without a word, I kissed the inside of her wrist and lifted her hand to thread the hair at the nape of my neck.

“Don’t be afraid to pull,” I said as I gave her a wicked grin and then, I descended on her pussy.

When we both came down from our high, the atmosphere was tense. Unanswered questions and unexplained absences were surely the only thing on her mind, and I couldn’t answer them. My heart fluttered as I stroked my fingers along the length of her hair down her back. I had never thought to stay after sex, it was purely transactional, but with her there was never an ‘after.’ There was just her and me in our own private sphere and I never wanted it to end.

Ten days.

“Don’t hurt me,” Laney whispered as she laid in my arms, staring at the ceiling.  
“After so long, I finally have someone and I just...please.”

She didn't say anything else, only placed her head on my chest and rested her eyes. A warmth swelled in my chest. I tempered my breaths so that I'd be her perfect pillow.

It pained me that I couldn't guarantee her safety. In ten days, I would ruin the life she knew.



### Chapter 17

#### LANEY

Kenna was gone again.

After training finished, she was placed on guarding duty, working twilight shifts. I stayed up for her most nights; I hadn't been sleeping well recently anyway. Her presence soothed me as if she could protect me from the things in my mind. It was my preferred sleep aid.

But last night was a rarity. I took my medication and as much as I fought my eyes to stay open, they fell shut before midnight. That was why it took me until this morning to raise the alarm. I ran to my office and found Forrester along the way.

"Was she picked up on any security feed?"

"No," he replied. "Last night she went into her room and the door hadn't opened since. Are you sure she isn't still asleep?"

I shook my head, adamant that if the duvet on her side of my bed laid undisturbed, it meant that she never came. I know her routine well enough now to know that this disappearance was not scheduled. Doubt seeped into my veins, a feeling that her charisma had turned me blind to her true routine.

Forrester sat behind my desk. "Laney, she's strong. You don't need to worry—"

“I’m not.” I snapped and then sighed, but I do, I wanted to say. “It’s just...she didn’t come home last night.” It didn’t occur to me until I saw the slight edge on his face that I’d implied that home was me. Could this get any more humiliating? It was already embarrassing enough to beg him to help me find her.

“Have you checked her room?”

“Yes.” I looked over his shoulder to peruse the motion detection log that recorded no movement the entire night, making me question whether she had a twilight shift at all.

His doubt hurt but I pushed through it. “And the barracks?” He asked.

I dropped my shoulders. “I’ll go look again.”

“If you don’t find her, don’t worry.” He tried to soothe. “People often find their own way home. Have faith.”

Have faith. Mindlessly, I looked for her brown eyes in every face in the mess hall, training rooms and offices underground. These were the parts of the estate that were the coldest, and the chill seeped into my bones. When it became one o’clock a thumping in the back of my head punctuated every breath I took. With each beat I suppressed a flinch.

It was why I hadn’t seen a man approach until I felt my body become glued to the brick behind my back. My head weighed down my movements. I could only decipher fragments of what this man was saying to me.

“I know,” he threatened. “...days are numbered, girl.”

“What?” I said with elongated vowels.

“You.” He punched a finger in my chest. “Took something from me. You’ll lose...”

It was like I was swimming in muddied water. I could identify the words, but they weren’t clear. His tone indicated a threat, but I didn’t even recognise the man.

“Name?” I managed to breathe out, before wrestling the accompanying words that would make it make sense. “What is your name?”

“...ren.”

Huh? “Ren?” I repeated but he hadn’t stopped to listen. The pounding in my head caused unease in my stomach.

“You’ll remember that name, Laney. It’ll haunt you.”

“So, Ren, can you give me a minute I need to—” I almost hurled. He took a violent step back.

“Crazy bitch.” He slurred. Or I heard it slurred? I didn’t know anymore. I bent forward, placing my hands on my knees, suppressing the nausea as best as I could. He obviously wanted to be heard, and I wanted to understand his words, but with my migraine and Kenna missing the blood filled my head to the brim.

When I looked at him again, he didn’t seem as disgusted. Just proud. “Better take some drugs for that.” He laughed at me.

I cocked my head to the side but didn’t say anything more. It was like I had missed part of the conversation. I didn’t have to wait long before he spelled it out for me. The water suddenly cleared. “Watch. Your. Back.”

Then, he walked away. Defeated, I walked back to my room too. The sun was too

bright shining in through the blinds when I entered it. But wait– I had curtains in my room. Not blinds.

And there she was.

Her wardrobe doors wide open with clothes scattered around her as if she just tumbled out of them.

“Kenna!” I shouted over her. “What were you doing in there?” She’s safe. She’s safe. I didn’t lose another person.

“I don’t know.” She responded.

“You’ve been in there for hours?” I said.

She gave me a blank stare. “Hours? I went to bed only a couple tens of minutes ago, I swear. There was only darkness for a while and a voice, saying that they were coming. And now suddenly, I wake up here.”

I lifted an eyebrow, but internally sighed. There was something in her face that I didn’t trust. I didn’t want to hear her lie to me again, so I told her my truth instead. “We were worried about you.”

“We?”

“Me.” I admitted.

She responded with a smile, running into my arms. I welcomed the warmth, but I stilled. Kenna was a confident person and always got what she wanted but I knew her well enough that hugging was not in her character. My arms wrapped around her

nonetheless, until Father walked into the room.

“What is this commotion? Quieten down.”

I looked at my father and jumped from her arms.

“Kenna,” I said, “Have you ever been known to sleepwalk?”

“Only as a child, but never since.”

“Things of the mind are often electrified in dreams.” Father added before walking away. Apparently, the mystery was over.

I nodded. “Especially in nightmares. With finding Tilly and the tension on the estate right now, I can totally understand that the stress could induce night terrors.”

She was visibly shaken, but in her hand, she clutched a black flip phone.

?

We were seated in the living room. Father and I were nearest to the warmth of the fireplace. Neenan was at the door routinely looking over his shoulders, and Kenna was reclined in her seat, looking on affectionately but with an edge of nerves.

Grandfather Edward’s grand funeral was scheduled for next week. The family portraits that he collected were delivered this morning, so that we could choose a piece to display at the procession. It was a big extended family affair, one I wish Tilly had, because she was just as important in my eyes. It was a big deal getting artwork that demonstrated strength despite turbulent times. We’ve been here for hours.

“Oh look, father, you were so cute when you were younger.” I held up a painting of a

short chubby corgi; their button noses did look the same. Neenan snorted.

A hush descended on the room. Only the sound of wooden frames shuffling echoed in the room. I looked toward Kenna. Our eyes connected and a small smile graced her lips.

“How about this one?” Father interjected.

I scrunch my nose. “Too frumpy.” The next painting froze me. “Kenna, I’ve found your long lost twin.” My eyes refused to leave the painting. Kenna stayed silent on her approach. “It’s beautiful. Look at that colour.” I looked up at her and she forced a smile. “Your pale skin, wow. It’s your match.”

“Who is it?” Kenna inquired.

I searched the frame for an inscription. It was vintage, possibly 1930s, and the corners of the painting were stained dark brown. “I can’t tell. I want to hang it in my room, though. It’s stunning. Just look at the floral background on it. It’ll look so good! Father?”

“Oh. Go on then.”

We scurried off to my bedroom, placing the painting on various walls. I went to test it over my bed, but Kenna suggested that it should go over the vanity, and it was perfect. The light from the window would hit it just right, she said. And I believed her, though it was night right then.

I handed the picture to her.

Her hands trembled.

“Are you alright?”

“It’s the chill.” She replied.

I covered her hands with mine. “I just need to get some tools to hang this up, okay?”

She nodded as I let go.

“Father!” I yelled as I halfway skipped down the hallway. “Where is the tool kit?” When I heard no response, I shouted, “Neenan?” Silently, I returned to the living room where Neenan and father were huddled over a particular painting. “What is it?” As I got closer, I saw that it wasn’t a painting, it was an image. It was one of the last group pictures that proudly displayed the union of the Ravencroft and Karstein families.

Father laid a finger on a girl in the second row from the front. My eyes followed the line of women before her. “Oh my god, is that the woman from the painting? She’s so pretty. A great grandmother maybe?” I continued looking along the line, to where I found the youngest girl.

“Get these pictures out of my face!” Father spat.

My heart skipped a beat. “No.” I protested, but I wasn’t entirely sure why. There was something so strikingly familiar about this image.

“It couldn’t be.”



## PART II

A very strange agony

### Chapter 18

KENNA

Ashift in the air warned me when Laney came back into the room, routinely looking over her shoulder, but the wariness dissipated when she turned her attention back to the painting.

“I need to make this house more friendly, don’t you think? What if we put this beside my mirror? Or wait—no, oh,” She exclaimed. “Wouldn’t it hang nicely above the fireplace!” Her excitement was not all the way entirely genuine.

I looked up at her on a small stool as she fixed a couple nails into the wall. For once taller than me. The house was unusually quiet. I could see the guard conjugate as normal outside on the lawn from Laney’s window. It appeared as a picture of normality, but something was off.

“Hmm.” I responded, wiggling my eyebrows at her, joking. “So, you can stare at me while in bed? I like it.”

“More like you can stare at yourself.” She forced a chuckle and then got quiet. “Can you hold this up for me?”

I stood immediately and held the frame against the wall.

My eyes strayed from the task at hand. I knew Laney was wary of me. In the last couple of days, I felt strange—like an insurmountable canyon was being filled with

water, and I was stuck at the bottom. The conversation with the guy in the forest had me on edge. His energy had been inconsistent, unpredictable, and that, with mounting tension on the estate, made me anxious.

“Is there something you’d like to say?” Laney broke the silence.

I stumbled for a response. “Just how beautiful you are.”

She blushed and looked away again, but there was something more she was withholding.

One of the guards from outside the window looked me dead in the eye then, and it made the blood drain from my face, feeling suddenly faint.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered to Laney, feeling as if static flooded my brain. “I need to sit.”

“Are you alright?” Her voice filled with concern.

I dismissed her. “Yeah, yeah, just let me—” I fell into a chair, but as I did a sharp pain ripped through my backside. I searched for the offending item underneath me, and laughed, nervously.

“Kenna,” She jumped from her stool. “Please, don’t open that.”

I shook the box lightly, eliciting a dampened rattle sound. It was a wonder I didn’t squash it when I sat down.

When my thoughts cleared, pleading eyes stared at me. “Please,” she said.

“What is it?”

“It was my mother’s.”

“You don’t talk about your mum that much?”

“Father barely talks about her.” I looked at her. A sad smile spread across her face.

“I haven’t opened it yet,” She explained. “I’m only meant to open it after I get married.”

I tilted my head, in confusion. She had already been married.

“I went into isolated counselling before my wedding night. Couldn’t open it.”

I nodded, put the box to my side, and leaned my head back into a sigh. My head was heavy, but my vision had cleared—finally.

“This stuff is full of memories, huh.” I tried to stifle the bitterness in my voice. A house was a house in my household, never a home. It was difficult to watch an operation of safety and security when your parents taught you how to handle a chokehold before a hug. Besides, I didn’t have enough stuff to call it a collection.

Wealth gave you the opportunity to explore possibilities. It was a luxury my family couldn’t afford, it’s why chains have become an accessory in my wardrobe. I couldn’t pay for jewellery.

Laney sighed. “Never got to leave, though. Not to go out, have fun, live my own life, you know?”

“Have you ever been to a party?”

“No, have you?”

A long time ago. It was a drunken haze of teenage petulance and hormonal disrespect that only led to mistakes and punishments. “You’re not missing anything. Believe me.”

“So, you have!” She grunted, “I just want to experience that.”

“You really don’t. It’s not what you think. Intoxicated people are so annoying.”

“Yeah, but you know that. I don’t, and I wan—”

“No.” The word cut through the room. I didn’t mean for it to come out so harsh. “No,” I said softer. “My memory is still foggy on what happened at the last party I went to. It was late, I was drunk, and something happened that night that dulled the colours of the world. I see it only through the lens of how a diver looks up at the water above them, transparent but rippling into obscurity. I woke up in a bed without the girl I went to sleep with, only this.” I pointed toward the scar on my collarbone. “You don’t want that.”

“You loved another girl.” It wasn’t a question, but the devastation on her face prompted me to answer it.

I shook my head. “It was nothing.” Getting up from my chair, I approached her and pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear. “One sided. Brief. Humiliating.” A dark cloud overtook my features.

That woman had used me. It was on a job, not unlike this current mission, to kill the head of the family business. But it was brutal. I was hired as a maid to the old matriarch, and when I would administer her medicine, she would reach her hand under my skirt and run her fingers through my folds. Each touch felt like poison had entered my veins, but I had to bear it to achieve the goal. She loved to play with her little fucktoy.

To cope, I fell into her housekeeper's bed to console me, and she eased my pain. The night I got drunk at the party, I was there happily dancing with the housekeeper, and someone whispered to her about the old lady's obsession with me. She didn't give me the chance to her that I didn't want them. She was disgusted and ran me from the house with the wound to my collarbone. I'd loved that woman for her comfort, or at least, I thought I did. Afterwards, I was told I was one in a long line of maids she'd used and thrown out. The worst part was that I thought she really cared.

Laney took me out of my thoughts when she looked down at her feet, suddenly shy. "Have you ever been in love?"

"No, never," I said, quickly, and lifted her chin to be in line with mine with a finger. "Unless it could be with you."

The words hung heavy in the air, clouding the room with an energy so unexplored and vulnerable neither one of us knew what to do with it. But goddamn, it was honest.

She cleared her throat after a prolonged minute. "We should get some wine."

I inwardly groaned. My head was fuzzy from feeling lightheaded already, alcohol would be a lethal mix, but I needed something to take the edge off the tension that racked my body. Nodding my head, I walked out the door after her.

She led me to a hidden staircase in the dining room.

“You have a wine cellar?”

“Of course, you don’t form an alliance with the Italians without reaping a reward.”

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I let out a laugh. Rows of white and red wines lined the walls, all from different parts of Italy, but mostly Sicily. Messina. Syracuse. Palermo. Scopello. They had it all. I stood in admiration of this wealth and opulence, yet inwardly, I fantasised about turning this place into my personal rage room.

“Pick one.”

My eyes scanned the shelves, back and forth, reading the names as if they meant something to me. Finally, I settled on one—a red Etna Rosso.

After I handed it to her, she took it to a minibar at the end of the shelving and uncorked the bottle before heading up the stairs again carrying two glasses.

I followed her out but took note of the secret passageway as we left. This might come in useful sometime.

A herd of men marched down the hallway at that moment caused the floor to vibrate under our feet.

I shot a hand out in front of Laney to stop her in her tracks, I used my outstretched arm to push myself in front of her to see round the corner of the door at the group of men approaching.

Dylan’s brother was among them and gave me a firm look. When I returned my gaze to Laney, I knew she saw.

“Let’s take the wine outside,” I suggested, and she agreed, moving toward the front

of the house, where we sat perched on the front steps.

“What’s happening?” Laney seemed to wonder aloud.

“I don’t know.” But I did. I just thought I had more time.

Most of the commotion was taking place behind the estate house, but groups of men discussed in hushed tones in front of us, too. They were throwing meaningful and worried glances at us and the side of the house when Neenan walked up to them and gave them a stern look with words I couldn’t decipher.

Then, he came toward us. “Laney,” he said when he got near. “Can I talk with you?” She went to nod, but he interrupted to clarify, “Alone.”

“It’s okay,” I said as I waved them off. I had to fight the instinct to bite my cuticles.

I watched the men talk as I waited. When Laney returned, it didn’t take long for her many words to fracture my mind into scrambled thoughts.

“Tell me about your family.”

## Chapter 19

### LANEY

The fire came from inside the house.

Neenan’s words rang in my ears, the resulting anxiety almost drowned out his next words. “Kenna’s enhanced background check came back sparse. She’s not registered at any school district in England and her family records show little relatives. I’m running her intake picture through facial recognition to be safe. I know you like her



but don't give trust she hasn't earned." I never let her out of my sight. Not even when he pulled me away.

I stayed standing in the hallway long after Neenan had left. My defence was weak as I listed all the facts I knew about her. Her family, her homeschooling, her dreams, but truly, I knew nothing. As that thought set in, my heart rattled thick pumps of blood in my chest, each thump marking the slow steps I took to return to Kenna.

Coming up behind her, I observed her eyes wander around the surrounding area, not focusing on anything.

Deep breath in.

"Tell me about your family."

Deep breath out.

She dropped her shoulders. "Laney..." Coming to her feet, she faced me and reached a hand toward my face to push a lock of hair behind my ear. "Don't make me go through it again."

Don't give her trust she hasn't earned.

I pulled my head back, away from her.

"Be honest with me."

"They were strict with me." Kenna stared into space over my shoulder. "Sometimes cruel."

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

Her eyebrows lifted.

“Where are you from, Kenna?”

“Bilham.” She answered too quickly, but at my angry expression she continued.

“Princess, what’s the matter?”

“Don’t lie to me, Kenna. I need to know. You were at that school. This isn’t the first time we’ve met.” The corners of my eyes stung with the exertion of not letting tears fall. I needed screams, not tears. “Don’t make me feel crazy.” My voice broke.

Resting a hand on my arm, she stepped closer to me. “I was homeschooled. I didn’t lie.”

“Stop it!” I burst. “Stop lying! Just trust me, please trust me.”

“I’m not, look—”

The tension in my body pulled tighter. I reached down to my ankle, whipping out my trusty mini weapons.

“Okay, okay, look,” She paused, the glint of the blade catching in her eye still her shoulders were set back. “I was at St. James's Academy.”

A relieved sigh struggled to release from my lungs.

“Briefly.”

I shut my eyes and pressed my lips together. “At the same time as me, Kenna. You said it couldn’t have been you. It was though, it was you.”

“It was.” She lifted her hands as if calming a stray cat.

“You remembered me.”

She nodded with me, a declaration that perhaps I wasn’t the only one haunted by the interaction. We were a dyad. I believed it.

“Why did you say those words to me?” Beware the assassin. No, that’s not right. Your mother warns you to beware the assassin. I scrunch my eyebrows. It didn’t make any sense. “You didn’t know my mother.”

“No,” she pleaded almost in prayer. “Just you.”

“Why can’t you just speak the full truth? More than a sentence, please!”

“There are things that I need to protect. Foremost, you.” She pulled me in for a hug, and I rolled my eyes. “Secrets have thorns, and I don’t want anyone to be pricked by information they didn’t have to suffer.”

“Why do you say that? As if revealing just the tiniest thing about yourself will bring others pain. They won’t. Quite the opposite, it would make me happy.”

“There’s not much there worth knowing.”

“Not true.” I tried my hardest not to hit my foot on the ground like a petulant teenager, but I think it looked the same to Kenna.

“Oh really?” She joked. A small smile played on her features.

“Yes, really. You’re a wonderful and engaging person, just hard as a rock trying to squeeze information from.”

“Seems you’ll have to squeeze hard. I know some parts of me that would like that very much.” It clicked a moment too late.

I groaned. “Ew, no, stop that.”

She leaned down to the point where we shared breath, suddenly serious.

“Never.” She sighed softly before landing a wet kiss to the side of my mouth.

“You’re distracting me,” I said in a singsong tone.

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The journey of her tongue from my mouth to my chest was wet and her voice was deeper than I'd ever heard it, when she said, "No, princess, I'm seducing you."

My blood thrummed at the prospect as my pussy became hot and damp.

Fuck it.

I wanted her more than my brain wanted answers. This was her game, and I was losing, but what a privilege it was to be completely undone by her. I never lied to her, I dreamt of this. Roughly, I grabbed her chin, lifting it so that our mouths almost met again so that I could say, "Then seduce and destroy me, baby. I'm all yours."

Then, devoured her whole.

Our mouths clashed and my back hit a wall. I couldn't see it, but it felt cold behind me as Kenna grinded into me with impassioned aggression that was sure to leave bruises in the morning.

Warmth spread over my body again as her hands wandered over every inch of exposed skin. I grabbed her arse with both hands, and with all my might lifted her further into me, bringing us closer.

I was keenly aware that the cameras were watching but too intoxicated to care. For once, I could do something for myself. Consequences be damned. Yet, somehow, it felt like the family was always involved in my sex life.

"Let's go to my room," I said and pushed Kenna off me, grabbed her hand tight, and

ran to the bedroom. The door slammed behind us. We fell on the bed in a brief giggle before ripping our clothes off.

She moaned when I pulled my jeans off, exposing my wet pussy to the gentle breeze coming in from the window. It gave me goosebumps.

“You nervous?” She asked.

I hooked my leg around her and flipped her. “No. I want to eat your pussy.”

“Oh, do you now?”

I nodded, laying her flat on the bed. This brazen character I was playing was purely selfish. For once in my life, I wanted to take and take without remorse for feeling. It wasn't natural for me. It was instinctual.

When she attempted to lean herself up on her elbows, my firm hand pushed her back down. Kissing in light circles around her stomach and upper thighs, I teased her, my hand outstretched to roll her nipple between two fingers.

“Don't think I haven't forgotten your avoidance of my questions.” I pinched extra hard, and a breath caught in her throat.

Dragging my hand down her body, I moved my mouth up and over her heart. With my other hand, I dig a finger into where her heart sits, beating fast under the skin. “This. I want this. And to get this,” I moved my hand to her hair and pulled it taut. “I need this.”

It was a rare feeling. To be above someone. In control. Usually, I was taught it only as a vehicle for death, but now I have only pleasure on my mind.

Using one finger, I circled her clit, bringing some wetness from her entrance to swirl and glide my finger smoothly over the surface. “Were your brothers at the school?”

“Don’t talk about my brothers now.” She growled.

I slapped the inside of her thigh. “Answer.” I swirled my finger again making her keel forward.

“No.” It came out in a harsh breath.

I descended my mouth to hover above her pussy. My breath skating across the sensitive skin. “Why not?”

“They’re older.” It was a poor answer, but still I latched onto her clit, sucking and licking. When she said no more words, I grazed my teeth over it. “It wasn’t necessary.” She rushed out.

It was my first time going down on a girl. My rule book of female pleasure was her treatment of me. Well, that and the internet. Nothing prepared me for the moment. Fake it till you make it, I guess.

I dove down between her legs.

She lifted her legs and wrapped them round my head in a rough hold. Undeterred, I lapped and sucked at her clit, occasionally dipping my tongue into her hole. She moaned in response.

“Why did you go there?”

“Reasons.” She fell into a fret of shakes and pulses as her orgasm crashed into her. It was remarkable to see and know I was the cause. Her hand kept me in place as she

effectively rode my face to prolong her high.

But I withdrew. “Good ones?”



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She growled and flipped our positions so that she was now on top of me. “Family obligation.”

I let out a yelp as her fingers invaded my entrance. The palm of her hand hitting my throbbing clit repeatedly as she slammed into me. It wasn’t necessarily pleasurable but boy, was it needed.

“What’s the real reason?”

My attempt to pull away was fleeting. Her hands clamped down on my hips and pussy and held me still as her fingers’ pace escalated.

“You.” She breathed. I didn’t have the mental capacity to decide whether that was a line or not, but my heartbeat jumped at the notion.

With my eyes, I begged for relief as the relentless movement of her fingers had me climbing to a climax fast. The glint in her eye was suspicious as she maintained my gaze. Her lips found a nipple and bit down on it.

“Trust me, Laney. Trust me.”

“I’m trying.” Anger embedded in my voice. I bucked at her hand willing her to touch my clit more, but she didn’t. Her fingers on a rough pounding trajectory. “Please.”

“You like me, princess?” She said without mercy. “Prove it.”

I was too far gone to question her words. I just wanted her to touch my clit. Was that

so hard? But Kenna was calculating, so I needed to change tact.

“I just want this to be genuine,” I said between moans and yelps. Her pace was unstoppable. Some of the angles hurt. “I don’t want to doubt myself.”

“So, don’t doubt me!” She punched one last finger into me before grabbing my throat with one hand and pushing her mouth onto my mound, sucking hard. “Come for me.”

The first crash was sharp.

The second relieved.

“Good girl,” Kenna said.

And the third calming as my release faded.

We caught our breaths together as we came to lay side by side. I kissed her shoulder, and she kissed my head. Silence filled the space. The echoes of our pleasure are long gone, except for the evidence left by the stickiness of my sheets.

Then, the weight of the day fell on my head. My character unmasked. And I stared at the new artwork that hung proudly above my fireplace.

“I feel sick.” I said, a migraine was hitting the inside of my skull in a chorus. “I’m going to sleep.” I winced as my head touched the pillow but tried to focus on the way that Kenna’s fingers lightly massaged the top of my head. “Stay with me...all the time...don’t leave my sight, love,” I mumbled as I was consumed by the pity of sleep but dreamt of the girl in the bathroom as a tear slipped down my cheek.

Chapter 20

KENNA

Isnuck out of her room before she woke.

It was easy to find who I was looking for. He was sitting with the other boys in the mess hall. His dark clothing was spotted with dust, as if he'd been crawling in a loft or down in the wine cellar. When he saw me approach, he didn't look happy.

I walked up to him with little fanfare. "Laney's sick."

Blood drained from his face. "How so?"

"Mentally," I said, but stumbled. Her personality switched on me last night. I couldn't deny that it was hot, her in control, on top of me. It defied everything that I had ever done, but I couldn't stop analysing her behaviours as if it were precursor to a psychotic break. Not to mention the migraine that followed, as if the mental strain had manifested into a corporeal ache. "And physically too. She gets migraines and..."

"Fainting?" Neenan finished for me.

"Yes."

"Find Richard Ravencroft." He said, sternly. My double step didn't elicit confidence. "Now."

It wasn't fear that made me hesitant, but I can't admit to Richard that I can't solve this issue. Doubt was already behind his eyes every time that he saw me. If harm befell his daughter, his finger would point toward me faster than lightning and strike me through the heart as a result. I deserve more than dying on a man's stake.

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Thankfully, Neenan wasn't addressing those words to me, but a man beside me. One I'd never seen before. Strange. I'd thought the high heat in the room was just my emotions, but looking around, it was crowded. They were expecting someone.

I had so little time.

Fine strands wrapped around my fingers as they took yet another stroke through my hair. The men strode toward the door, and I followed behind him.

When we got to Laney's bedroom door, she wasn't there.

Neenan looked at me as if I had made it up. A distraction. Just the thought that Laney was some kind of joke hurt.

"No—" I started speaking when a door down the hall opened. Dylan's brother stepped out of Sir Ravencroft's office, in handcuffs, Laney appearing a moment after.

My eyes grazed her body up and down. Unharmed. But gaunt and pale.

She looked at me with deep sorrow and it was as if a curtain had descended between us, but I didn't see who had pulled the string. Neenan went to them, but I was barred.

"Miss Whether." Richard held a hand up for me to stop my approach. "Find your station. Away from my daughter and away from us. You make her worse. Don't come near her until she is well."

"Kenna." A deep baritone voice said in my ear, too close. "This way, please."

I stepped backward, away from her, watching her father drop a soft kiss to her head. An intimate act I envied. I turned around and walked behind Forrester's surly stature as he imprinted heavy step after heavy step into the maroon carpet of the house.

What's happening right now?

He led me outside on the pavement beside the barracks. As we turned a corner, Grant barrelled into me. Briefly, out of sight from the cameras and onlooking cadets, he gripped my arm tight, leaned in close and whispered. "Don't fight, go limp."

"Now, Traitor." Forrester's voice boomed from in front of me.

I furrowed my eyebrows, but he was already out of sight before I could respond.

Running to catch up with Forrester, I found him standing at the back of the barracks, on the tarmac at the furthest point from the estate, just before the treeline. It was quiet.

When I reached his side, he pushed me down, the pavement scuffing the skin right off my knees on impact. I whipped my head up to him, about to argue, but that was the moment I saw the metal glint of a gun in his hand.

"No," I said, eyes wide. "You don't want to do this."

All he said was, "Stay." Like a dog.

I pushed up on my foot, but a hand touched my shoulder. Turning my head from side to side, I searched for a way out.

The shuffle of boots distracted me from the gun in his hand and the crowd forming. Some look surprised, but most look hungry, as if they were salivating to see violence.

To see me marked by that violence.

An old brick wall was behind me. This was old-school strategy.

“Today, we witness the death of a cadet charged with conspiracy to murder Richard Ravencroft.” I was starting to think that I may have been a topic of conversation in Richard’s office—not only Dylan’s brother. They found out. They found out.

They know.

Oh god, was he going to be dragged to this spot? Right where my blood will barely be cold, puddled beneath me.

Four feet in front of me, Forrester stood, legs shoulder length apart, slowly raising his arm.

I was staring down the barrel of a gun. My dad taught me not to cower in death, that pleading for your life would ruin your image. Accept the consequences and stay confident in death. I pushed back my shoulders and pinned him with a meaningful look.

Go limp, Grant said. Those are not words spoken if you were about to murder someone. They were words of mercy. Why would he save me?

Eyes on the barrel, I saw the twitch of his finger on the trigger and restrained a flinch. I was going to lose everything.

When the bullet discharged, I fell forward. Faithful to a man I always thought hated me, I disengaged from all my muscles and closed my eyes. I hit the ground in a puddle of my own limbs.

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No bullet penetrated my body.

A muted cheer passed through the crowd, but before it would progress to outright celebration, Grant's voice silenced them.

"Back to work. Now!"

Footsteps approached me before a hand gripped my arm. It would surely bruise. Another hand grabbed my other arm and dragged me across the pavement. My head flopped between my shoulders with a rough tug.

My hips hit the stoop as my body was transported into the building. This room was cold, bright through the skin of my eyelids and clinical smelling.

Suddenly, my body left the floor, and after a brief moment of being suspended in the cold air, I was placed on a metal table.

"Look at her," Forrester said and poked my side. "Not so strong now. Bitch."

I felt his eyes on me. The shallow breaths I'd been practising threatened to develop into a cough. How long was I going to have to play dead?

"Go inform the rest," Grant spoke, and I could hear the shuffle of boots and then a resounding bang.

My eyes shot open.

Forrester's body had crumpled onto the floor, blood gushing from a hole in the back of his head. He hadn't even reached the door.

I looked toward Grant, whose eyes were stuck on Forrester. A smile played on his lips. "Not so strong now, huh?" He taunted and rolled his eyes before looking back at me. "Bastard."

Too many words sprung to my mind, and none formed sentences as my mouth hung open. Grant didn't offer an answer, either. He just looked at me. Eventually, I settled on a simple "What?"

He raised his eyebrows as if I should already know what was happening here.

"Grant."

"Norman." Huh? "That's my real name, Kilina."

"What!" He couldn't be...could he? "You're...you're from the—"

"Yes." He interjected before I could get out my family name. "They think you're a traitor, but they have yet to find out who you work for." He looked down at Forrester again, "Kinda dumb to skip straight to killing you than answering a simple question. Richard is a boy pretending to be a man, I swear."

I managed a chuckle. He certainly wasn't the ruthless leader he imagined himself to be. How could they possibly know? "I didn't even do anything yet."

"I know. They are sensing the discontent among the ranks, and they found the easiest person to blame. You were the one who reported Dylan, for all they know you blamed him to protect yourself."



“I would never kill a girl. Pointing fingers isn’t going to do anything, they need proof.”

“The fact that you are evading death right now is their proof. They don’t think you did it alone.” He leaned in closer. “Look, there’s security tape of you disappearing into the woods. You found Dylan; you found the girl. I am going to try to explain to them that the bullet missed all vital organs, and you made a spectacular fucking recovery but, in the meantime, you need to be out of sight. Don’t be seen, don’t be heard.”

“Yes, Sir.” I nodded, a grave expression on my face. “How many of us are there?”

“Including us?”

I nodded.

“Four. There used to be more, but Dylan got a bit too excited too early, so we had to withdraw some troops.” A deep sigh left my lungs. I feared that number was much higher. “You’ve met his brother. Sorren. Or at least he told me so.”

Sorren. I needed to memorise that name, but stay far, far away from him. That bastard. “Did he tell on me?”

“No.” I was relieved at that answer but somehow knew it wasn’t the whole of it. “But he did inform on your relationship with his daughter.”

“Why was he in handcuffs then? Richard would praise him for that admission, no doubt.”

“He was digging into unauthorised files. Security tapes from when his brother died.”

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“He’s a security guard, isn’t that his entire job?”

“Not these files. A soldier of his rank didn’t have permission to access the extended surveillance footage he was attempting to get at. I’ve been trying to hack into it too, but whatever is in there is too valuable to be held on normal hard drives. They store it in The Cove. Laney built it.” Of course, she did. Smart cookie. It also explained why she was in that meeting with Sorren and her father.

More importantly, the only thing on my mind after I almost lost my life to the Ravencrofts. “Did Laney know?”

I shut my eyes while I waited for him to respond. The timing was too perfect, and there was no universe where her father wasn't the one to orchestrate this whole thing.

“No. Not about you.”

My entire body stilled. There was nothing I was more confident of. “Keep it that way.”

Norman sighed and agreed. “Yes, and that,” He pointed toward Forrester on the floor. “Stays between us.”

“Absolutely.” I nodded, distracted by the pooling blood beside his head. It made me shiver.

?

I watched her sleep for too long. Her light snores soothing my maniac heartbeat. It was welcome after the day I've had. Dear God, I just wanted to wrap my arms around her and fall into a deep sleep. But I knew there was a guard at the door.

It was the first night in a week that I had spent alone. There was something so wrong about it, so foreign, that I came here instead, simply staring. I was content to stay for a couple more minutes. Maybe I'd fall asleep in the chair. I just had to stay as per her request and as per my heart.

A light humming sound came from her laptop that I hadn't noticed before. It was still on. It laid on top of a pile of paper, the header of which said: Edward Archibald Ravencroft's Will.

I neared the bed to reach for it and turn it off, but a hand shot out from under the covers and slammed the laptop shut again.

"You came?" A soft voice spoke beside me. I hadn't noticed it, but her eyes were wide as if she had been watching for a while.

The corners of my mouth lifted. "I did."

All the instincts in my body wanted me to confess everything to her, tell her the truth, and have her stay and not hate me.

"I need you," her breaths come out haggard. I rested a hand on her forehead. It was hot.

"We shouldn't. You're not well."

"I'm fine," she asserted as she swung her legs out the side of the bed. "I want to. Do you?"

“I do, but I should go, princess. I’m not willing to get you in trouble.”

I tucked a hair behind her ear and pulled her closer to place a firm kiss on her head. She flinched before relaxing back into my arms.

“You told me to stay with you, so why do you flinch when I’m near?”

It took a few minutes for her to respond.

“Could I just...” She fingered a hole in my button-down shirt.

I grabbed her wrist and planted a kiss on the inside of her wrist before letting go. “No, princess.”

She needed sleep and a clear mind. I needed sleep and her.

“Please, baby, just quickly...” Her hand dug a heavy trail down my body, skimming across my pubic bone downward. My body came alight at her touch, and I tried my hardest to step on the coals to put it out.

“Laney,” I drew out her name.

“Just once more,” she whimpered under her breath.

Conscience that a man stood on guard at the door, I lowered my voice and pressed a finger to her lips. “We’ve gotta be quiet.”

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She nodded and grabbed my jeans.

“No, no, no,” I said. “You’ll have me, but not now. I’m yours.”

Even in the dim light, she looked cute when she pouted.

I laid down beside her, me the big spoon and Laney the little one.

“What happened today?” I asked, kissing her behind the ear and drawing her closer to place a hand under her pyjama top.

She sighed, and I saw her eyes flutter shut as if she were in pain.

“That bad, huh?” My thumb caressed her stomach, coaxing.

No words tumbled out of her mouth. It was a rare moment when Laney was without them. Only a grave revelation would do that.

“I think you’re a Karstein.” She whispered and turned toward me in my arms, placing her hands on either side of my face as she examined my features. “The dark hair. Tall build. Penchant for automatic weapons. I didn’t want to admit it, but I somehow always knew you were too good to be true.”

My hands paused their caressing. “Is that right?”

“At first, I denied it. My teenage fantasy is my enemy, I couldn’t, no, wouldn’t believe it. You’d told me things, things that didn’t make sense as a Karstein.” The

look in her eyes was cold, a mirror image of her father and her hands constricted. “But then, I thought back on all the things you didn’t say. And suddenly, the picture was whole.”

She grabbed my chin roughly and turned my head to look at the painting we’d hung over her fireplace—my grandmother.

My jaw locked at her force as she lent all her weight on that hand, pushing my face into the bed and using her grip to climb on top of me into a straddle, knives in hand.

“Give me one good reason I shouldn’t slice your throat right this second.” She turned my face back to face her and trailed the blade’s edge along my jawline, gazing intently at my features as if committing it to memory and never meeting my eye.

“You wouldn’t.”

The blade pinched my skin at her added pressure. “And why ever not?”

I cocked my head to the side. I needed her eyes on me. “You like me too much.” My hand went to her hip, stroking the skin under her shirt. “Even love,” I whispered.

Her face slackened.

It startled her enough that I could get her under me in one swift move. However, the pull on the bed sheets also pulled Laney’s laptop from her bedside table, bringing it crashing to the floor with a loud thump.

A voice screamed her name outside her door, but she kept quiet while maintaining direct eye contact. My heart thrummed. Merciless bitch.

The door swung open, and I lifted my hands in defeat. “Step away from her right

fucking now. You shouldn't be in here!"

I concealed the little knives in my sleeves and let myself be dragged from her body and out the door before I yanked on the guard's grip and slit his wrists with the knives to set me free. Something I hoped to be akin to a papercut. Minor but devastating.

As I felt now.

## Chapter 21

LANEY

Ihated doctors.

Early this morning, Father informed me an attending doctor would visit me to check me over. The past four weeks had rocked things off-kilter, but I didn't think it would have to come to this. I'm fine.

I waited in the dimly lit library on the eastern wing of the estate. It was cold and damp as if the books contained the moisture of the past, not just the words. The shelves went from floor to ceiling enveloping the entire room with a cosy, yet imposing feel.

The night before had been rough. I transposed her facial likeness image captured on intake on the painting. It was a perfect match. I was crushed, and so angry. Why did I turn a blind eye to her before she earned it? Was I that gullible that only an ounce of attention would have me foregoing my family's security. I couldn't admit this to Father.

At exactly three p.m., a stocky-looking fella walked in behind my father, a couple of

steps behind his long stride. He wore nothing that indicated his medical authority except a badge with his name that, thankfully, had MD written after it.



“Hi—”

“This is my daughter, Laney. She’s been sick for a couple of weeks. She looks pale, sleeps little, and is anxious a lot.” He listed my ailments like accolades: “Migraines. Fainting. Rashes.” I covered the redness around my neck. “What is the matter with her?”

The doctor looked at me, uncertain, before he spoke curtly back to him. “That’s what I’m here to find out Sir, don’t worry.” Turning his gaze back to me he said, “Good afternoon, Laney. My name is Dr Archibald Borley, I’ll start by asking what you think the problem is?”

“I’m really not sure. I’ve had episodes before. Usually, they’re caused by a mental crisis, but I haven’t felt necessarily stressed for a while now. Grief-stricken, sure, but stress, not really.”

“Stress is a silent killer. It marinates under the surface and often presents itself before you even know it. I understand that the fainting is induced by anxiety?”

“Yes.”

“Was it sparked by the grief?”

“No, I got diagnosed with anxiety four years ago.”

“Medicated?”

“Counselled.”

“Are you still seeking counsel?”

“No.”

“I see.”

“It’s not that. I know it. It’s something else. It’s something concrete.”

“Mental health issues are concrete. What has made you think otherwise?”

Father let out a huff at that moment, rolling his eyes, but Dr Borley went on, “Grief is a stressor. You might not have even realised it as a cause. It’s a process; it’s still early days into the grief. I understand you have a funeral coming up soon. That’s fresh—”

“It’s something else!” I burst out. My head hurt again. “It’s something external, I know it.”

“Sure, Laney.” He smiled pleasantly, placing a hand on my leg.

I flinched.

“Moving on,” Father growled.

Dr Borley ran some routine tests, checking my blood pressure, reflexes and heart. When they all came back normal, well within healthy ranges, he returned to his line of questioning.

“Do you have experience of prolonged issues similar to this prior to this episode?”

“It’s new.”

“Okay. Any other diagnosed disorders apart from anxiety?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Do you have any allergies?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but Father interjected.

“To tea tree oil, yes.” He spoke fast, brief and direct. “Why is that relevant?”

“Well, prolonged exposure to an allergen can develop into a case of chronic inflammation, like migraines, fainting and difficulty breathing.” He looked at me.

“These are the symptoms you complained of. And such agitators on the body can induce mental flare-ups from the stress.”

“You think that’s the case?”

He nodded.

My father shook his head. “When could she have been exposed to tea tree oil? Her mother had the same allergy. I’ve made sure that no tea tree oil products are used.”

“It’s a common ingredient in many products, cosmetics or medicine.”

“Don’t test my patience. Each item that comes onto the premise is vetted.”

“Perhaps it’s not an item, but a person. Like in fragrance.”

“Fragrance?” Father turned to me, his gaze darkening. Only one person came close enough for me to breathe in their perfume for a prolonged period of time. “Symptoms started six weeks ago. Fuck!”

I sat back in silence. It all made sense.

“Is that a plausible conclusion?” His head turned toward me for reassurance.

A little sombre, I gave him a nod. I could hear Father seething in the corner.

Then, Father dragged Dr Borley to a quiet corner of the library, where they exchanged hushed tones. After the fourth occasional glance thrown at me, I tilted my head, confused. When they returned, it was tense.

“Leave,” Father said.

Kneeling, Dr Borley gathered the supplies he'd brought as I continued to simply sit and think.

"But, Laney," The doctor lowered his voice to a whisper. "It is in my professional experience that grief and mental stressors do not disappear without facing it, I think you shoul—"

"Leave," Father repeated, unmistakable command in his voice before he brought his gaze to meet mine. "We have our diagnosis."

Without another word, the doctor left, and Father sat in the chair he'd just evicted. Bereft. After ten minutes of silence, he pulled a folded letter from his suit pocket.

"This correspondence was delayed, it's from Aldo Novelli. He's arriving later today for an urgent meeting. He didn't tell me the reason, but I want you to attend."

He handed me the open letter, but he didn't look pleased, which was unusual for him, especially when someone as close an ally as Aldo Novelli was coming. Instead, he looked like he wished Novelli was at the bottom of the North Sea. Something was on his mind that he wasn't ready to share.

"Father, please tell me what's going on," I said, laying my hand on his arm and looking at him imploringly.

"Maybe," he replied, gently smoothing my hair.

"Does the doctor think I'll recover?"

"Of course, Sunshine, he thinks if we take the right steps, you'll be on the road to recovery in a day or two," he answered dryly. "I just wish Aldo Novelli had chosen a different time. I need you to be well to welcome him."

"But please, Father," I insisted, "How do I heal?"

"Distance." My heart collapsed in on itself. "Away from the allergen. Or the cause of the allergen."

"But—"

"That's all. Don't bother me with questions," he answered with more irritation than I'd ever heard from him. Seeing that I looked hurt, he kissed me on my cheek and added, "You'll know everything in a day or two at least, all that I know. In the meantime, don't worry about it."

He turned to leave the room but came back before my mind wandered to her and how I kicked her out of my room last night. He only mentioned we were going to the Karstein ruins to meet Novelli and that we'd start walking at dusk.

"Don't let her out your sight." Father poked a finger into Neenan's chest where he had stood guard at the door. "Not for even a moment."

I could barely hear their next words. "Where's Kenna?" "Stables." "Good. Keep her away." Then he left.

When we were finally alone, Neenan came to sit across from me.

"How's your girlfriend? In trouble with daddy already?" He moved his eyebrows in a joking manner. "What did you do? Fuck on the front porch?"

“She’s a Karstein.”

His jaw fell. “Wha–WHAT?... How– how do you know?”

“I just do. There was always something about her. Alluring but off.” I shook my head. “As if the words she’d say meant something entirely different to me than to her. You can’t tell anyone.”

“I can’t keep that a secret! She’s the traitor. We have people looking for her.”

“You have to!” I shouted too loud. “Neenan, you have to.”

“Laney...” He trailed off.

I held up a pinky finger. “I’m dealing with it. Promise.”

“Is she planning something?”

“I don’t know.”

“Does she have access to our armament room?”

“Yes, armed and trained in our tactics.”

“And security clearance?” He said louder. “Does she have it? She could open the gates.”

“God, Neenan, I didn’t quiz her on it!”

“Well, someone’s gotta. She could be inviting her whole family here. Or even a whole army. Laney, didn't you think about this?”

I stayed quiet. Sadness spread over my features. I just wished that for once, I could be more. More than a pawn. A strategy. For once, I wanted not to be of use for somebody. Tears pricked me.

“Oh, Laney, you really liked her, huh?”

“No.” Not yet. I couldn’t. Not at all. Not even an inkling of like. But a whole spilt ink bottle of love. God fucking dammit.

“Hey, it’s okay. You like who you like...”

“I didn’t want to lose another person.” My voice cracked. “I can’t. Neenan, I just...” I took a deep breath, and my thoughts shifted. By replacing water with fire, I smoked my tears, reaching out to swipe my hand out to knock over a pile of books from the table, causing a violent crash. “I’m so sick of fucking losing people!”

Between the attacks, that strange guy in the hallway and Kenna’s betrayal, I wasn’t safe. Neenan hugged me then, but the formality of it all caused the fracture of my heart to widen.

?

When the sun fell behind the treeline, I was ready. Not long after, my father and I set out on our walk, Neenan following not far behind. He insisted on arming us before we left. I touched the knives tied to my thigh for good measure.



Passing the drawbridge, we turned right and followed the road over the steep Gothic bridge, heading west to reach the deserted village and the torched ruins of the Karstein house.

“Sunshine?” Father said. “Don’t lose touch with your family legacy.”

Stunned to silence, I paused for a moment. “What makes you say that?”

“You’re my only daughter. I should’ve known they’d come for you in particular.”

“Excuse me— What?”

“Don’t be dense, Laney. You’ve been at the centre of our strategy for years.”

“But...but I was never given much authority. How could I be at the centre of it?”

“With heart.” He nodded. “I didn’t want to give you the stress or ego that being the heir can bring. It was your grandfather’s idea.” Granddaddy, you always knew me best.

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“That makes no sense, all this time, I thought it was my heart that you hated most.”

He looked at the floor, ashamed. “The heart is dangerous.”

“Why?” I breathed, but he didn’t answer.

We kept walking.

No woodland walk could be prettier yet more haunted. The ground gently rose and fell, covered in beautiful woods, free from the formality of artificial planting and pruning. The uneven ground often led us off course, causing the path to wind around the sides of hollows and hills, creating endless scenic views.

Then, the blackened brick of the Karstein house came into view.

“Because the heart rarely listens to reason.”

I was confused.

“I’ve made mistakes, Laney. This is perhaps my greatest one (is that redundant?).”

I leaned closer to him. “What?”

As a child, I knew our family was tainted by something. I always hoped that one day, I would be worthy of knowing the reason.

“When I was seventeen, I was angry at the world, three sheets to the wind, and so in

love with your mother, that reason left my brain. I don't remember it clearly. It's like looking up from the bottom of the ocean; things are there, solidly but not clear. The heat of the match, though, I can still feel to this day. It felt heavier than it should've. I'd locked every door and window before I did it, except one, the library. I threw the match in there, easy fuel. It was windy that night. The Karstein house burned quick."

"It was you." My fist clenched.

That's why he's the black sheep of the family. Pity didn't enter my body. Not for him. Only sorrow for Kenna and her family. I was taught to hate them, but perhaps their blame was justified. We're the bad guys.

"I'm the heir?"

"That's the reason. No one trusted me again."

"After your mother passed away, I was left with an infant and reinvigorated anger issues at our loss. My father took pity. And took you in, me only by extension. I was a spoiled bastard. Hot-tempered. Reckless. It's why I lost everything, Laney. I wanted to protect you from it all. You're nothing like me. Grandfather wanted it to be yours." He lifted his hands.

"I don't want it," I said quickly. Not with that history. Jesus.

He chuckled a second and lightly shook his head. "Foolish girl. I know that. I've changed the organisational structure so that you'll no longer need to worry about that. Your Grandfather dying was a blessing." His hands clamped onto each shoulder in a way I thought that he might think was affection. "I'll rule. It's going great so far."

My mouth pitched open.

Rounding one of these bends, we saw the burned Karnstein mansion come into view, and I recoiled. The blackened brick was haunting. And to think I was living next to it, the site of my father's demise—his regret.

I shivered. As I looked to my side, it wasn't regret that washed over his features, but pride. Bile burned at the top of my throat. Maybe I could do it? I want this. If only for it not to be him.

I was so focused on the house that I hadn't noticed our old friend, Aldo Novelli, sitting behind the tinted glass of his Audi R8.

He got out of the car as we approached. After the usual greetings, his tight smile morphed into a mask of resentment. Bleeding hurt and anger into a turbulent expression, he incessantly tapped his finger on the side of his thigh.

A beam of light shone through the dense trees, illuminating a scabbed wound on his face.

"Oh God." My jaw fell open.

"It's a long story," he said, "Buckle in."

## Chapter 22

KENNA

I haven't seen Laney all day.

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Even when she held a knife to my throat, I still thought she was the most beautiful woman alive. A sentiment I knew I was itching to tell. My knee bounced in trepidation at the thought, but deep down, I knew it was fantasy. She told me to leave.

It's strange. For my entire life, I lived without attachments. Even the older woman I bedded was a play, a strategy to find relief in that dull house. Still hurt when she used me too, but I got over it. It was always a means to an end.

This, however. Laney, however. Was something more.

My blood drummed in her presence. Be it last night at the threat of her violence or in that dark school bathroom, we were shaped from the same thought. Mother forbade me from crying, but wetness collected in my eye, drawing a path down my cheek as I stood in the courtyard that meant so much to her.

I had to fix it. But to do that, I had to strip bare. The Ravencrofts didn't deserve such candour, but Laney did as she always had with me.

A sharp trill erupted from my back pocket. When I pulled the burner phone out to see the caller ID, I audibly groaned.

"For Fuck's sake," I muttered but wanted to scream.

I stepped into the woods to find a quiet area. After twenty minutes of crunching leaves under my boots, I sat on a tree stump and returned her call.

"Leave me alone."

“Kilina! That’s no way to speak to your mother. What’s the fucking hold up?”

“Nothing.” I said, my voice reminiscent of my teenage self. “It’s a waiting game. You know this.”

“No, you’re a sharpshooter, Kk. Get your head up from between her legs long enough to do it.”

God fucking dammit, Sorren. Who else had he told?

“Don’t get distracted like you did last time or so help me God, I won’t trust you again—”

“I killed her, didn’t I? Job done. What more do you want?” My heart raced. “And what about your trust? This was my operation.”

“Your brother killed Edward in three days of surveillance.” Somehow, I didn’t believe he did it. It was too neat to be one of us. Karsteins always threw a stick in the mud before we made our mark, we were stubborn, and we wanted to be known. I was taught to hate the Ravencrofts at the same time that I was taught my ABCs, we didn’t allow a single bullet mercy to be the final demise for Edward Ravencroft. It was too easy.

“A two up, two down house in the Scottish Highlands is a different ballpark to an entire estate, mamma. This place is crawling with cameras.”

“And he did it all alone.”

“So can I! Trust me.” I pulled the phone from my ear and aligned the microphone with my mouth as I gritted out, “There are others here. Why?”

“Because. “Your” operation got derailed by a girl.” I wanted to interject, but she didn’t give me the chance. “The daughter must be real cute, huh? She wasn’t before. Puberty hit her hard?”

I stayed silent and shook my head repeatedly.

She only laughed. “Typical, Kilina. Wait until I tell your father that it’s true. And he wanted to believe in you.”

I ignored her. “Get these other men out of my operation, mother.”

“I sent one in for reconnaissance before you arrived, sure, it’s not my fault you got so slow I had to send in back-up. That’s on you. Sloppy fucking operation, your father taught you better than this. Does this name mean nothing to you?”

“It means everything.” I conceded. “But trust me. I can do it.”

“Edward Ravencroft’s funeral has been scheduled.”

“Yeah, I know, there’s a whole procession in town.”

“Don’t let me down.”

“Won’t.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.” I hung up.

When I departed from the darkness of the woods, Sorren was there waiting for me. I gave him the cold shoulder, but still threw a punch into his side as I passed for good measure. He worked under me. Don’t get it twisted.

But like a good puppy dog, he followed me inside the house. Round each corner. All the way to the family kitchen away from the other soldiers. Laney showed me it one night when she had a midnight craving for red velvet cake. I was shocked they had some. I wasn’t used to this rich people world.

After I found some day-old pasta in the fridge, I plopped down at the secluded table in the corner. “Look, who got let out the dog cage.” He didn’t find it funny, but I did.

He sat across from me before he spoke. “Kenna, they know.”

“No.” I lifted a fork in his face. “They think they know. I’m not in handcuffs yet. Unlike you.” No, you stared down the barrel of a gun.

“You will be.” He said far too soberly for my lunchtime reflection. “And I was only there because I was slightly aggressive toward Forrester. Dumb fucker.”

Couldn’t agree more. He deserved his fate.

“But look how fast they killed my brother after they found out. I didn’t get a goodbye.”



Perhaps, I should have been more sympathetic, but the snark refused to simmer down within me. He almost had me killed, but he knew my identity and he showed me that he wasn't above disclosing sensitive information. "Did they even know you're related?"

"No. And don't tell them that."

"Well, there you go then." I mocked with my hands up. "And...I would never. That's suicide. I'm not stupid."

"Just..." He tried to find the words. "It'll be too late once they realise. There's chatter in the barracks. They're looking for a traitor. Whether it's authenticated or not, they will shoot first and ask questions later."

Oh, I know.

"I'll be fine." But I wasn't fine. In moments like these I wanted a pair of arms around me. Usually, I wasn't picky with who, but lately there's only one person I'd like to hold me, and I haven't seen her since last night.

After a long pause, Sorren noted a sombre truth I wished could be erased from my thoughts. "She can't save you."

In my bones, I knew it, but it was in my mind where twisted thoughts of a loving paradise were facing off with visions of romantic tragedy. I won't betray my family. But I also can't betray her.

I stared at the table and gently shook my head. A pit forming in my stomach.

"I won't save her either." He continued. "I saw the tape, she was the one to do it. She killed him and then, she sat across from me in his office. Prim and proper. Sweet

even. All I could see were flashes of Dylan's mangled and bruised body. Tell me why I can't exact revenge on her."

"You know that it was Richard Ravencroft's hand to play."

He bolted up from his seat and slapped his hand down on the table. "She... She buried that bullet in his brain—I can't let that go." Tears sprung in his eyes, but his pupils were wide open. Intense with want. Then he looked directly at me. "Forget Richard, I want to kill her."

I shook my head again, pained, it was a hard image to paint in my mind. If I were him, I wouldn't think twice. He was far more noble than me. Much more disciplined.

Then, a shy smile crossed his face, and my heart sank. "Maybe, I already am."

I stared at him, multitudes of possibilities passing through my head.

"Killing her, I mean. You know the anxiety medication she takes?"

"Migraine." He cocked his head at me, so I clarified. "It's migraine medication."

He nodded before speaking again. An agonising pause. "I soaked her pills in tea tree oil."

No. "Sorren!" I shot up from the table. From the doorway, eyes tracked my movements in a split second before continuing on. That moment of hesitation, that doubt, could kill me. I lowered my voice into a calm tone. Oral intake of tea tree oil was toxic at best, lethal at worst. I needed him to understand. "Replace those pills immediately! This is my operation, stand down. Trust me, please."

With heavy lids, he blinked slowly as if he were staring at someone he pitied. I didn't

need pity. I'd survived too much for it to be minimised by a lesser man. Don't get caught in a war of hearts, blood will always be thicker."

Did he think he knew better than me? "Hearts can change." I hoped. Attachments were dangerous but I knew in my healed heart that she was worth it.

“Blood can’t.”

“Please, don’t. Avenge him, don’t ruin yourself for revenge. My father,” I chuckled thickly, “Nailed it in my head. The reward is sweeter with a cause. Pity, murder, and violent rampages are a temporary reprieve. A cause to fight for? One that ends in victory? Long term delight. This. ” I circled the area with my finger. “This will be ours. Soon enough. Eyes on the prize, Sorren.”

His breathing had slowed during my speech, but fire still burned in his eyes. When he turned his flames to me, I tried not to flinch away from the heat.

“Is it true...” He stopped and started a couple times. “Uhh...Is it true that your father beat you?”

“He loved me.” I lifted my head to stare over his shoulder. “In his own way. I’m stronger because of it.”

“You still have faith in your family name?”

“Of course.” I stood from my seat. I need to bin her meds. Right now.

“Why?”

“Because I’m stronger because of it.”

This was worse than I imagined.

## Chapter 23

LANEY

"Why the secrecy of this meeting, Aldo? I would have welcomed you with tea in the warmth of our boardroom, like old times. Or, you know, a phone call?"

"There has been a situation. I feared my presence on the estate would escalate it further if what happened to my family is a sign of anything. The fire came from inside the house, I needed to be sure of my audience." His words were vague, and he kept glancing at me as he directed his words at Father. "Rich."

But before Father could respond, I began. "Sir, don't be disrespectful."

"Logan tells me you're feeble and like to run. You can't run your mouth with this."

"Your son's ego is bruised, mine isn't. Have you seen his hand recently?" I rolled my eyes. "What's this really about?"

"My mother was assassinated."

I gasped. "How?"

Flavia Novelli was the true matriarch of the Novelli dynasty. Without her, the structural integrity of the Novelli family business crumbled into dust. They've been fighting to determine their successor for decades, Flavia was a young mother, she had time.

He shook his head. "You wouldn't believe it."

"Start from the beginning..." Father prompted.

“There was a girl. She swindled her way into my trusted liaisons and took what was most dear to us.”

I found myself resting on a fallen tree as he relayed the story. The nettle stings spread across the back of my legs from where I leaned into a cluster of those leaves beside the tree. I didn't even notice.

“We met her at a party near Christmas time. She approached us and told a convincing story about how she was once acquainted with us. An old family friend or something, and she never clarified. Her beauty was incredible, and we all fell for her charms.”

I shook his head as he didn't believe it himself. A memory detached from him. His face was blank when he went on. “Flavia was most taken by the girl. Fawning over her dark black dress and piercing brown eyes. There was admiration there. I smiled along. In her older age, she needed company desperately. I was so naive.”

The words sunk slowly down my body to form a pit in my stomach.

“Mother needed live in care but there wasn't a long list of people we could enlist for the role. Until her. In fact, she volunteered. It was perfect. But Flavia became suddenly ill soon after she arrived at our home. Disappeared for hours on end.”

“I entrusted this woman with a duty of care she did not deserve. Mother became worse by the day, but her symptoms were nothing natural. Fainting and lethargy. It was so very strange. The only one with access to her medications was this girl.”

“As time wore on, her symptoms worsened. She became bedridden and we moved to be near the estate's chapel, praying for salvation and longevity of life.”

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“The girl was too busy hooking up with the housekeeper. Twice we found them in the security office, hands up where they shouldn’t be. And twice we thought she was just subordinate but then she just disappeared. We realised too late.”

I took a deep breath, shaking my head, it couldn’t be.

“It took until the autopsy to have a diagnosis.” Aldo dropped his head. “It was a new controlled substance, called Hilianiphame. Sickly in small doses, but lethal with prolonged exposure. It’s enthused with tea tree oil. Makes it look like death from natural causes.”

“It was sabotage,” I whispered. Please, don’t let this be true.

“The only ones with access to illicit substances such as those were the Karsteins. I’ve seen nothing of the sort since they burned. But it was real. After we cleared the girl’s room of her belongings, we found the substance that killed Flavia. It was inscribed with a...”

“KK.” I finished for him. It hadn’t dawned on Father like it had on me. If I was lucky, I would keep it that way, but the danger was much more deep seated than I realised.

Aldo looked at my father and only once he nodded did he continue. “I wanted to warn you to not let any strangers in your home. And also, to advise you that we’ll be taking a step back from operations. This incident has exposed internal weakness we need modified.”

“What about our agreement, Aldo?” Father questioned, drawing close to him.

“Our mourning time ends in five days. Novelli security guards will not be at the funeral either. We’re going dark.”

Tension hung in the air. He was being too coy, too obtuse, to make sense and it made me want to reach for my knives. Bastard.

My chest constricted and I forced out a cough.

“Are you sick, Laney?” Father placed a hand on my back.

Aldo leaned down, getting too close. “Pale complexion. Dilated pupils...” He trailed his words. “It’s too late.”

“Did you receive any visitors recently? Is anyone getting too close?”

My cheeks burned and I prayed they didn’t notice.

“Laney,” Aldo implored in a small voice. “You know who it is? You have to tell us.”

“It’s the Kars—” I tried to say but I was distracted by Father.

He had his hands on his face, a cruel sneer across his face and as he turned to face me, I knew he could read the guilt spreading across my face. Still, he denied it. “It’s not possible.”

Aldo kept his attention on me. He repeated my name a few times, but my attention was drawn to the man pacing behind him. It seemed to irritate Father who was clearing a path through the dirt and leaves a couple strides away from where I sat. Muttering to himself a string of “blazed” and “all of them” and “aflame.” to himself.

Frustration grew loud and the words broke out my chest. “How are you so certain that



no one walked out of the fire?”

“Because I watched it, Laney!” He spat. “I watched it burn and crumble to dust. If there were survivors, I’d know!” This was more sickening than I had imagined.

I wished for a hole in the ground to swallow me and never let me out. Shame overcame me and I bowed my head. Why did I have to become attached to the first thing that came my way? If I weren’t so desperate for attention. Stupid stupid girl.

“We do know.” I conceded.

Tension filled the air until Father burst. “So, help me, God Laney, I warned you to get rid of her. In that painting? I hope she was some housemaid or distant cousin. Not this? Fuck!”

Tears threatened to fall but I held strong, I turned to face him, standing so suddenly, I wobbled. “This wouldn’t have happened if we had stayed in London. Hidden in plain sight. Grandfather didn’t want another war. It was you who let her in. Wasn’t me, was it?”

“I put you in charge of staff vetting. You said it was okay.” He waved a finger close to my face. “You swore it was just allergies, but look at you, fucking drugged up.”

“I’ll deal with it.” I pleaded.

“And to ever think I’d let you lead. You don’t even have control of your heart.”

“I will fix it, I promise.”

He laughed over my words. “How can you? You were under her thumb.” When his eyes found mine, his anger had morphed into a sick kind of humour and arrogance.

“Don’t worry,” he promised. “I’ve fixed it for you.”

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All the breath in my lungs left me. The last time he'd fixed something I was forced to slash the limbs right off a body. The only thing that remained was echoing whispers of Father manipulating me into killing Dylan. It gutted me.

Did he...? Like I had to 'fix' the Dylan issue? I needed to run. The only obstacle in the way was Father, I froze as I thought through my next steps.

He sensed my stillness as defeat. "See, Aldo, this is what happens when you trust little girls. They disappoint. Too consumed with the whims of feeling to really believe a girl would fall in love with he—"

"It's not that easy! She cares about me."

"No, you care!"

Aldo chose that moment to interject. "She has no remorse, Laney. She broke my family where it would hurt the most, she knew."

"You're wrong. You're wrong. You're wrong. She loves me. You're wrong."

"She doesn't love you." Father implored. "It was a trick, Laney, an obfuscation. I should have forbade her the minute I sensed you were getting close. I knew it."

"Don't pretend," I spat out in disgust. "You were convinced by her too. You did this. Leaving me vulnerable and alone my entire life, I latched on. Yes, maybe too soon. But that's on you."

“Stop it, child. When you’re in tears two weeks from now, and she leaves you in the dust, I won’t be the one to wipe your cheeks.”

“You never have, Father, that’s your problem. When I was crying for her in secondary school, you didn’t see them then either. You won’t now.”

“Secondary school?”

“Yes, she was the girl I had a crush on even th—”

“This is bigger than I imagined.”

“She told me then to be aware of the assassin, she cares.” I rambled on, not even noticing the look Aldo and Father exchanged. “She warned me.”

Aldo huffed heavily. Father took a step back.

I don’t understand why he can’t just trust me with this. Time elapsed slower than usual as I processed his words more fully.

Oh my god, she is the assassin.

## Chapter 24

KENNA

Laney was sick.

The estate was on lockdown to prepare for Edward Ravencroft’s funeral. It was finally happening. Tomorrow morning. And she was ignoring me tucked in her bedroom, door locked. I tried.

Laney would be in attendance. As would her father.

Poised in the front row of the church, or inside the first car of the procession on some make believe throne that they deluded themselves into thinking they deserved, with authority they had no right to. But most of all, pretending that things weren't falling apart behind the scenes. It was fake.

Discontent was brewing amongst the staff, rumours about Forrester's disappearance were rife and with Novelli out the game, the Ravencroft Estate was poised for revolt. Sorren had given me a wink across the courtyard this morning, but I turned away.

I was the catalyst for revenge, but I'm only now realising that Sorren was the impetus for revolution.

After all this, I could only hope for resolution. The Karstein's revenge plan has been in the works ever since we burned, but it was at St. James's where the obsession began for me.

Tasked with surveilling the princess granddaughter of Edward Ravencroft, I first laid eyes on Laney, pulling down her sleeves and keeping her head down as she walked from class to class. I thought she was cute, but maladroit.

I took my time confirming her identity to my parents. The scars on my back are a result of my tardiness. Many thanks to my dad. I didn't think I'd be here again. More obsessed with her than ever, it was the opposite of what I wanted. What I needed.

I came to her long after nightfall like a phantom in the shadows. It was the only way to be incognito in a house like this. To my surprise, I found her door unlocked.

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When I cracked the door open, I was hit with the warmth of the residual fire along with the sweet scent of lavender and lemongrass that was uniquely hers. Sorren hadn't said how long he'd been tampering with her prescription, but I only had a finite amount of time before she got too sick. In the darkness, I took this opportunity to look for her migraine pills that I had failed to find in our shared bathroom.

Laney let out a melodic groan as she turned in her sleep to face me, likely sensing my presence in her space. I admired her briefly, so calm and peaceful in her dreams, until I noticed a small cardboard box sticking out from under her pillow.

A-ha.

I needed to get those pills away from her, but her intoxicating smell lured me into her bed. Warmth radiated from her, and it took everything in me to not collapse in her bed to snuggle in her body. I didn't want to disturb her as I slipped beneath her sheets. Maybe, if we cuddled, which I was dying to do anyway, I could reach the medication and dispose of it tomorrow morning.

But the moment she felt the shift of the sheets, she shot up in her bed. When she saw it was me, no fear appeared in her widening eyes, just a wariness. She let out a long exhale, face glistening with a clear sheen as if she'd been crying, before turning on me. She looked as exhausted as me.

"You can't be here." She yelled in a lower register.

"Hasn't stopped me before." I said, as I continued my descent into her warming bed and laid down beside her. So close, yet not close enough. It was cosy and reminded

me of the recent past. Things seemed so easy then.

“Well, I don’t want you here.”

“We both know that’s a lie. I came t—”

“Things have changed since then, Kenna. The magnitude of your invasion...I didn’t even consider it, everything is not as it seems. You have to leave.”

“I can’t.” I grinded my teeth together and outstretched an arm to lower her back onto the mattress, eyes fixed on her. “See, Laney, your little ramblings and affections are cemented in my fucking head. And you won’t leave it! So, I’m not going to leave you either.”

“Oh, you unilaterally decided that.” She said, but my extended arm almost reached the box of pills. I could feel it, but not quite grip it. “You’re a fool if you think this is a choice. There are bigger things at play here.”

“Don’t you think I know that? I’m a ploy, Laney, in this big fucking charade. My whole life led me here—” I stumbled for words, as I withdrew my arm, box in hand. “Please just listen to me. Forget this, forget us. Listen.”

She pushed her shoulders back, watching me intently. That was my move.

“You knew about Dylan?”

“I knew,” I continued, her face morphed to tearful panic, “Laney, you have to live with that.”

She nodded, a dark expression appearing on her face and her eyelids shut. “You know.”

“Yes, I know, it’s okay.” I cupped my hand on her cheek. Shame was the last thing I associated with her, or us. “This. This life...we all make choices, it’s best not to hide from them, just face them. Especially now.” Tilting her face so that her eyes were on me, focused, I said, “Dylan has a brother. He is also here, his name is Sorren. I’ve tried to talk him out of it, but he wants revenge. Foremost on you.”

It was like she was a deer in headlights. I was almost certain this mafia lifestyle had never reared its ugly head to look her directly in the face. Until now. I tried my best to not envy that. It wasn’t her choice. But now I saw her loneliness mirrored back in my eyes. She has been deeply marked by it. I didn’t know.

Then, her eyes glanced down, and colour flooded her cheeks. “Why have you got that?”

From any other angle this looked suspicious. “These were tampered with.”

“Oh my god, you are the one who has been making me sick!”

“No, no. I didn’t do this.” I shot my arms out in a motion to get her to calm down, but it just made her explode.

“Yes, you did! You’ve been making me sick from the beginning, everything changed since you arrived, and I thought it was fragrance.” She spat. “I’m so stupid to not see it before. Of course it was you, it’s drugs.”

My features hardened. I needed her to know the truth. “It was Sorren, not me, you have to believe me.”

“I don’t know what I believe anymore. All this, I thought you just liked me.” Her eyes closed. “There’s always a purpose.”



“Princess,” I dropped my hands, “I won’t let anyone hurt you, I promise. Cross my heart.”

“I don’t believe you.” She whimpered and it punctured my heart a little bit.

“You have to trust me. Keep one eye over your shoulder and your knives up your sleeves, please.”

“I do, I do, I always do.” She repeated like a vow, getting louder each time, and getting up from the bed. “I should’ve used them. On you.”

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“Shhh,” I whispered, while mentally, I had to tell myself she didn’t mean it or else I feared my heart would fall right out my chest. “Father said he’d killed you.”

“He tried.” I admitted, soothing her gasp immediately by threading my arm around her back, pulling her back onto the bed. I needed her close, and she needed me, despite her words. “He also failed.”

“Thank God.” The sentiment warmed my cheeks. I hoped to override her instinct to flee with touch and affection. But we both knew this was a temporary fix.

We laid together for a minute, backs flat on the bed, both just staring at the ceiling. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the painting above her fireplace. It still hung but it was at an angle as if knocked in haste or purposely placed lopsided.

A smile played on my lips at the thought of her being unable to tack down the portrait that reminds her of me. I meant something to her. I knew it. She didn’t want me gone, she couldn’t stand it. And neither could I. With that in mind, I turned to my side on the bed, committing every inch of her to memory.

“Is this real?” Laney whispered, eyes stuck on the ceiling still.

“Always.”

“Not the circumstances. They were manufactured.” Her head turned in my direction. She still didn’t believe me. “Were the feelings too?”

Reaching out an arm, I pushed a hair that had fallen behind her ear. “No, all my

emotions were real.”

“Even at the beginning?”

“At the time, I wouldn’t have thought so, but yes. I couldn’t deny you.”

“Even back at St James’s?”

I could tell she was fighting the insecurity in her heart that told her I cared for her because I had to. It wasn’t true. “From the first moment I ever saw you, my eyes have found you first in every room that I’ve walked into, and my heart has skipped a beat each time you returned it.” A single tear slid down her cheek, and I pressed a kiss to it to stop its journey.

“You know,” I continued, “When my mother told me I’d be going to state school to spy on this teenage girl, I almost threw a tantrum. The only knowledge of schools was from TV, so I told her that I didn’t want to be around those bratty, soft, and entitled girls. And she just said, ‘well, that’s tough,’ but little did she know, bratty and soft were my favourite kind of girl.” I poked her side, and she squirmed into a light laugh.

“Father calls me sensitive.” She said after a few moments.

In response, I draped an arm over her waist and pulled her close. “Sensitive is how I like it.”

Her eyebrows furrowed furiously. “Why?”

“Because sensitive is you.”

“Ugh, corny much? And that’s not a good thing, you know?”

“And why is that?”

“I feel things, too many things, too much. It holds me back.”

“It doesn’t have to be. You’re very emotionally intelligent, it’s a strength.”

“Don’t flatter me.” She pulled a decorative cushion from behind her and hit me with it.

“I’m not.” I said, sternly, but I was laughing too.

“Well, you’re obsessed with me anyway, so your opinion doesn’t count.” It was a joke, but she didn’t know how true it was. She consumed me.

Hugging the cushion to her chest, she looked at me. The stagnant air filled the room with the overwhelming dread that all this was temporary. Tomorrow was the funeral. The deadline.

“I don’t want this to end.” She whimpered. “Don’t leave me.”

But I would. We both knew it, her father even before we did. “He tried to have me killed.” My voice cracked. “If he saw me here, saw me now, he wouldn’t hesitate.”

It was a devastating blow to deliver, and it made me bereft. Not because of the fact that Richard had designated me enemy number one, but because of the clinging arms that snaked around my neck. And with it, her legs cinched my waist stemming the blood from reaching my head. I didn’t care. Over the last couple weeks, she had become as important as oxygen.

If I were to lose her, I would at least revel in the feeling of lethargy that came with a lack of circulation and dread the blood rush that would fill my head again in her

absence.

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“I’m sorry.” She whispered into my neck, pulling her arms extra tight before she let go.

One more minute. I pleaded to myself. One more hug.

But she had other ideas, and as the blood returned to flow in its regular rotation, I couldn’t process how to respond to her next words.

“Tell me about this older woman at the Novelli house.” Her eyes darkened as she commanded me to look at her. I couldn’t control the voracious beat of my heart. This wouldn’t end well.

“How do you know about that?” I stammered.

“Aldo Novelli told me.”

That woke me up. “About me?” My fingers twist into knots. They weren’t meant to be here. Their operation should be in shambles, I made sure of it. Flavia was the bedrock of their family, without a floor to stand on how did they manage to walk all the way here?

“Hmmm.” She said, sinister. “I don’t think he knows it’s you in particular.”

I tried my hardest not to panic. “And he’s here? Right now? On the estate.”

“Yup.” She said with a pop of the ‘p’.

Adrenaline pumped through my veins, while I tried to keep my breathing even. “Don’t punish me, Laney. I’ll tell you anything, what do you want to know?”

“Did she fuck you or did you fuck her?”

I took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. “It doesn’t matter. How many Novelli members are here?”

“Yes, it does matter. Was she better than me?”

“What? You jealous?” I challenged. She was finding reasons to hate me. Maybe this was for the best? “You want to know all the other girls I’ve touched before you.” My voice turned seductive. “Every pussy I licked. Every mouth that sucked mine. Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” she hissed. “Every goddamn detail.”

I knew it had to be a lie. Heavy hands trailed her body as I attempted to call her bluff. “The Novelli housekeeper left one button of her blouse undone every single day. It was easy access for when she pushed my back into the fridge, her hand under the short skirt they made me wear with stockings.”

“Was she good?” Laney asked, red in the face.

“So good,” I moaned, but I wanted to cry. “She kept me up every night in her office, fucking me repeatedly on every surface. Wall. Desk. Floor. Chair.”

She gasped and her hand fisted in the fabric of my jacket. I slapped a hand over her mouth as I bent my head to get close to her ear. If this was what she wanted, I’d indulge.

“My pussy was always wet for her,” I said, but she was more important. “As you are for me.”

“No.” She sounded uncertain, and thrashed against my grip, but I already had my hand in her shorts, the heat from her core radiating. I didn’t touch her.

“Jealous yet?”

Defiant, she turned her head away. “Never.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t want this.” I gripped her upper thigh, hard. “That you don’t want me.”

“No.” With a groan, she reached for me, tugging on the lapels of my jacket to drag me closer.

“Nuh-uh.” I taunted her. “Ask nicely.”

She kept quiet but pulled harder.

“Laney...”

“Give it to me!”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:36 pm*

In a swift motion, I gripped my hand on her throat. “I said nicely.”

“You don’t deserve nice.”

“You’ll get what I give. In or out?”

She looked anywhere but at me. “In.”

I had my fingers wedged in her in a second. She keened as I curled my finger, both rough and rhythmic as I built her up. “You’re soaked, princess. You sure you don’t like me.”

She ignored me to pry my hand from her throat and lean back on her elbows, with the change of angle, a desperate moan escaped her throat. “Please.”

“Not yet. Hold still.”

My fingers glided smoothly from her opening to her clit. Then I pulled my fingers away from her, inserting down to wet my clit. I moaned at the pressure.

She squirmed, fidgeting with the buttons on my jeans and yanking them down. Her movements were rough. We laughed between heavy pants. Finally, cool air touched my thighs.

I kissed her then. Pushing myself inside, desperate to get deeper, closer until I would be submerged in her heat. Her nails grazed my back, sure to leave marks tomorrow morning, but for this moment, I didn’t care.

Her hand skated up my body, under my bra, making my nipples harden before she could touch them. When she did, I moaned into her mouth, breaking our connection to gasp before descending back into her warmth.

My hand rubbed circles into my clit. I grabbed her hand to replace mine as I moved my mouth from hers to go down on her. Tit for tat. When she rubbed, I sucked. Our bodies in tune with each other, like an endless battle of give or take.

I brought her to the precipice just before I pulled away and placed a kiss on her clit. Moving my body away from hers, she dropped her hands too. Confusion marred her features.

“I want to look at you,” I explained and reached a hand down to my own clit, circling it as I watched her do the same. It took an effort to commit this image to memory. Her high, her fall and her comedown. I wanted that journey to keep repeating. Daily. It was only ever about sex.

Her eyes were shut when I hit my orgasm.

Afterward, we laid beside each other. She scratched my head with her nails, lightly, weaving intricate patterns in my hair. It was bittersweet. We could only get this kind of peace behind locked doors.

“So, you’re really a Karstein. You can’t pull a 180 on me, change identities again to someone who isn’t an enemy.”

“No can do.” I replied sadly.

“Why are you here?” She continued the massage on my scalp. “Like really? What is your plan?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Stop hiding from me, I won’t think you’re a monster. I already know your penchant for murder.”

“It wasn’t always by choice, believe me.”

“What is your real name, Kenna?”

“Kilina. Kilina Karstein.”

A slow nod confirmed she heard me. “I won’t tell anyone, Kilina.” She whispered. “If you don’t hurt the people I love. Leave us alone, but I can’t guarantee that Father won’t come for you again.” Little did she know there were other actors at play. The funeral was tomorrow, the big showdown. I prayed she wouldn’t get hurt in the crosshairs. She met my eye then. “Stay safe.”

My stomach dropped as I stood silent. This was goodbye. Though, I hoped that she knew that I would get to her father before he ever approached me.

“Please leave. We’re over.”

“Princess.” I pleaded.

She crawled back to bed. “Go.” And turned the light off.

Escaping through the window into the dark night, I swore I heard the crash of glass.

### Chapter 25

#### LANEY

She was really gone. Disappeared. Kenna never reported to her station this morning and left me with the feeling of not knowing if I could return to the person I was before. The loss and grief had surely left an imprint, but she was the one to confront me with the realisation that everything was not as it seemed.

Goddamn me for caring! I cared so much, I'd be blinded.

Father was a mystery, his betrayal of the union darkened my entire life and I'd been none the wiser. I feared Grandfather had been trying to send a message of his true character for some time, but I was too naive and comfortable to begin to question it. His isolation said it all. He didn't want anything to do with Father.

Neenan informed me of her desertion over breakfast, failing to show up at her post. Father had sighed deeply, as if relieved. But I knew that the further water retracted from the beach, the bigger the next wave would be. I could feel the anxiety in my bones.

I stood in front of the mirror in my room. No matter her betrayal, I would do anything for her to give me a confidence boost right about now. She was always good at that. The dress straps on the only other black piece I owned were digging into my shoulders leaving marks.

I was preparing for the funeral and didn't want to repeat the outfit I'd worn for Tilly,

she deserved something special just for herself.

Granddaddy's funeral was a much more grand affair. His loss would be felt by the entire Ravencroft Estate, holdings and affiliated parties. The people of Great Tenor were required to give up their high street for it. The businesses we laundered money from: casinos, bars, clubs, didn't matter, management had to attend otherwise they would forfeit our protection. Their tax levy probably paid for the whole charade.

It all felt inauthentic. I was likely the one who knew his true character, he had cold hands but a warm heart, the warmth of which my father rarely got to see. The family lore made more sense now that I knew the fissure was Father's mistake. He was at fault, and I couldn't help but see the Karsteins' resentment toward us as justified.

Yet, my heart was in these people. Ravencroft was written all over me and it always would be. My family was small, but I held them close. If I didn't, loneliness would drown me in a second, never getting the chance to touch the surface.

That feeling of anticipatory fear held me still.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Laney, we've got to get in the car in ten, are you ready?"

It was Neenan.

"Almost!" I shouted through the door. Looking in the mirror, I felt like there was something missing. I was wearing a simple black dress, the skirt stopping just below the upper thigh. Low enough to conceal my blades. My short heels negated my need for socks, so my usual hiding spot was missing.

I had on a red lip, a light powdering of black eye shadow on my eyelids and my dirty

blonde hair was arranged in a half up, half down style with two locks of hair framing my face at the front.

It was pretty. Dainty, even. But it missed a spark. An edge. And I have just the idea.

With heavy footfalls, I strode out my room.

“Hey, Laney, you look...good.” Neenan said, but I just blanked him in the hallway, opening the next door on the left. I headed straight for the wardrobe, and he followed me.

I’d only been in her room once or twice, and neither time had I stayed long but the space felt familiar. Her personal effects were dotted around the room, it was inimitable. It was her. Perhaps, she hadn’t truly left yet. Hope sparked in my lungs for a brief second.

Or maybe I didn’t know her at all.

The door to her wardrobe was left open, her boots still lined up at the bottom. But that wasn’t what I was looking for. Shifting the hangers quickly through my hands, it wasn’t long until I found it.

“Are you meant to be in here? It’s kinda creepy.” A voice came from behind me. Wuss.

In my hands was her classic leather jacket. It was perfect. I smiled.

I flung it onto my arms and looked in the mirror to judge the fit. I could see Neenan’s less than impressed face in the reflection. “She would want me to have it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certain.” My eyes trailed my body up and down. I was hot. It was a thought I never associated with myself. Maybe cute or sweet. But this was something else and I was obsessed. Turning to him, I signalled. “I’m ready.”

?

Father already sat in the car when I stepped inside and with it, all my confidence drained from me. His ironed suit masked the unstable man wrapped inside it. The shine of his boots was at odds with the darkness in his eyes. He really thought he owned the place.

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“You’ve got to look composed up there, Sunshine. It won’t be like Tilly’s funeral, this is a big deal.” I rolled my eyes to mask the hurt, blinking away the forming tears.

“She deserved this more than Granddaddy.”

“No,” he spat. “This is what I mean. No mopping about, no irritations and absolutely no talk back. Edward is a symbol. Show some respect. You hear me?”

“You get what you gi—”

“You hear me?”

I bit my tongue. This man had marked this family with a curse all those years ago, the discontent in his ranks was proof of it, and the traitors that walked among us were of his own making.

“Good.” His head in hands, he leaned back. “No matter what you think about me or this family right now. Leave it alone. Let it go.”

“You massa—”

“That’s exactly what I mean, Laney. None of this.” He dropped his hands and pointed toward me. “Yes, I killed them. You don’t get to harbour hatred toward me for it. I did it for you. For this family.”

“You’re not going anywhere, Father. Why are you scared?”



“It’s tense at the estate. We must be prepared and not divided.”

“But you didn’t prepare me!” I burst out. “You kept me hidden for most of my life, and now magically, I can take authority? That’s not how that works. How can I be on your side?”

I sat back, quietly seething.

“This doesn’t leave the car.” Of course, he’d be thinking about his image above the real root of the reason. This family was built on death. Was the money laundering not enough? The seedy bars? Illegal gambling?

As we drove toward Great Tenor chapel, I could see the droves of people lined up along the street. Some with their heads bowed, others staring directly at us. Either way, they had blank expressions on their faces. Our car trailed the hearse that had flower arrangements in the formation of a large ‘E’. Funerals were one of the only large scale events wherein our underworld operations were public.

Guards were noticeably sparse around the heaps of people, but no less armed. I recognised only some of the faces. Others were unfamiliar in their stoic stance yet nodded at each other as if they knew each other.

The car slowed as we neared the chapel, silence pervading across the whole crowd. And the show begins.

Neenan opened my door, extending a hand to guide me up the steps. As we did, he leaned down to whisper in my ear. “You look great, show ‘em what a leader looks like. For Grandfather.”

Ah sweet confidence boost. I made sure that in the next step you could hear the click of my heels on the stone stairs and with a sway of my hips I made them believe in it

too. The power.

Father walked behind me, but I led the way. Through the doors, I stopped to greet the clergymen conducting the service. Thanking them for their dedication to a faithful and dignified sent off for my grandfather. My father bypassed all of that and had already taken a seat at the first pew from the front. His body was turned to the side seemingly, to argue with one of the clergymen that was handing out service programs to each row. We were one of the last to arrive.

It hit me. I could usher in a new era for us. Neenan at my shoulder seemed to feel it too, standing close like a personal protective officer. As I moved to follow Father to our seats I caught a glimpse at the image by the casket.

A portrait of Edward Ravencroft standing tall and proud, but with a gentle smile so unique to him. He wasn't good, but he was so good to me. Stepping up when my father took a step back, I'd be forever grateful for the times he listened when no one else had before.

Next to the portrait sat a smaller painting. It was a group image of the Ravencroft and Karstein families at Christmas. I smiled at it. Granddaddy was proud of forming that union, it was only right that it be honoured in his death.

"Father, it's fine." I placed a hand on his shoulder and pushed him down to a seated position.

"It's not, the fucking Karsteins cannot be honoured in such a way."

I gritted my teeth trying to suppress my anger. "It was his greatest legacy, he wasn't the one to ruin it. Sit. Down."

His eyebrows shot up at my tone, but I continued. "You wanted me to lead?" I

shrugged. "I'm doing it my way."

A deep, hearty laugh escaped from him. "Don't be silly, child. You're not in charge yet."

"Have you read his will, Father?" He looked down. "Once this facade is over, I get to sit in your seat."

"Don't count on it," he said, darkly.

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“I’ll get a lawyer. You don’t have a leg to stand on.”

“He was my father first.”

“He was more of a father than you ever were.”

I sealed my lips and sat at the other end of the pew. The division was apparent to any onlookers. I kept my eyes facing forward and waited.

Soon, the chapel filled with people, however, it was as quiet as it was when I walked in. Whether out of fear or respect, I was thankful for the stillness. Just before the service began, Neenan sat next to me.

At the first note of the organ, I grabbed his hand and tried to stifle my sniffles. I bowed my head, trying to hide from the eyes on me. But by the time the song ended for the service to truly begin, I was already choking on a sob. I knew they all heard.

Then, Neenan placed a handkerchief on my lap, but it wasn’t his. Inscribed on each corner, just I remembered, was a cursive K.

K K.

Kilina Karstein.

It warmed me from the inside and made me double down on sobs. Thank you.

I looked around the chapel as the priest led the service. Father sat in stoic silence to

my right. Past him stood a long service guard pinching his lips together as he stared intently at the top of the altar. Five feet beside him another man's attention was wrapped on the service, his hat in hand. Next to him, stood a woman, knees spread parallel to her shoulders.

Arms folded.

Sans leather jacket.

Sadly.

One side of my mouth twitched upward, before returning to face forward. Not gone yet.

The speakers changed and my father took the stand for his personal tribute. "Thank you for being here to honour my dearest father, he was the strongest man I had the privilege of holding so close to my heart. He'd be proud of the turn out tonight. Humble guy." He fidgeted with the lapels of his suit as he moulded himself in the image of a sympathetic man. "After the tragic loss of my wife, darkness descended over my entire life at the same time that a new light brightened it, my daughter." His eyes were on me. But I was looking at where he had sat before his speech. Aldo Novelli now kept his seat warm, his eyes frantic. "He saved me. I thought my life ended there, but he guided me toward another purpose. A redirection. Edward touched our lives in many different ways."

When Novelli found my eyes looking at me, he stilled and threw a glance over his shoulder to the tearful guards I had noticed before. His eyebrows lifted as if imploring something to me that I was too thick to understand. Father continued. "But for me, it is impossible to escape him. I see him in myself. Now, there's a gaping hole. Bless his soul."

Crock of shit.

Father sat down next to Novelli. I kept my gaze on them. Their exchange was brief, and I couldn't hear what they were saying but I'm certain of the words I saw graze Novelli's lips. 'That's her,' when Father looked behind him, he nodded and whistled for a guard, before turning his attention toward the new speaker.

I followed suit, but the order was nagging, distracting me from the service. They better not touch her. There was no loud commotion. I glanced behind me.

To my surprise, the guard hadn't moved, just smirked.

The organ hummed back to life as Edward Ravencroft's last song was played. It was a hymn I didn't recognise but its tone was sorrowful and compelled a hush over.

After the service, we were welcomed to visit the casket and say our final goodbyes. When it was my turn, I pressed a kiss to my fingers and placed them on the casket, over where his head should be. It was a closed casket funeral.

Can't have the fearless leader looking weak. Or well, dead.

Afterwards, a moment of silence was held. The casket was lifted by six guardsmen and carried down the aisle where they had pried open the heavy wooden doors with a loud thump.

As we left the chapel, Novelli winked at me. So strange.

Behind the casket, Father and I walked. Down the steps and onto the streets of Great Tenor. I kept my head bowed in mourning, while Father held his head up high.

White flowers were thrown into the street. At first, it registered as a touching gesture

until I noticed that the flowers were soaked in a red stain. The crowd followed us as we rounded the corner onto the high street, the main procession area. It took me too long to recognise it for what it was. But between the white flowers, pomegranate halves were being thrown too.

My heart sank.

And there was nowhere to hide. All eyes on me as my steps slowed and I fell behind Father's relentless pace. He hadn't looked down yet. If he had he would see the sheen of pomegranate juice on his boots.

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That was the moment the first shot rang out.

The casket fell to the floor as I fell to my knees. Hands over my head.

Pomegranate juice stained my knees.

But it was mixed with a deeper red liquid. Thicker. Warmer.

When I lifted my head, a scream lodged in my throat.

### PART III

Descending

Chapter 26

KILINA

Seeing her was a risk. It was commencement day. The deadline. I should've stayed on the estate, but I couldn't let go. Laney might not understand my reasons, but she understood who showed up. It was going to be me, if no one else. At least that was what I was banking on.

That was before the first shot rang out and nothing but regret coursed through my veins. I should've known something would happen here and now. I'd hoped it would be contained at the estate.



The second shot was much worse.

A warmth spread on my side. When I touched it, my hands came up sticky, and when I looked at it, all the blood drained from my face. This was bad.

That's when it started to burn. The echoing sound of my whimpers filled my head, no other sounds managed to penetrate through my skull.

I held my hand over the wound, the blood loss forced my thoughts to run into overdrive. It's just a bullet graze. You've gone through worse, Kilina, grow up. The thoughts circled in my father's voice. Get up. Keep moving. That one sounded like my brother's voice. Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god. I didn't recognise that one. It wasn't in my memory. Kil, move now, bitch. Lennon. My friend. Oh my god, Kenna, oh my. Kenna? Kenna.

"Laney, get the fuck away from me." It sounded more aggressive than I intended as reality faded back into view, though, my eyes stayed glued shut. Still, I knew it was her.

"I'm not leaving you," she said.

"Silly girl." I chuckled and coughed. With no vision, I clambered into a seated position from where I'd lain slumped on the floor. My knees had caught most of my weight. I pushed away the hand she rested on my arm. She needed to be gone. Anywhere but here right now. "Go!"

"Don't move."

Only when I got to my feet could I open my eyes again. Laney crouched low to the ground where I had been laying. Chaos was all around us. Feet were stamping in every direction, the quick motion blurred my vision. What was happening?

I looked down at the gun in my hand. I was meant to hit Richard. That was the plan. I did that. So, how did the bullet find me?

Laney pounced, then standing firmly in front of me. I took a deep breath. Her smell intoxicating. It didn't help me keep a clear mind, but it soothed my heart. My breathing slowed.

When I looked up, I found Neenan standing in front of us, and we were staring down the barrel of a smoking gun. I couldn't decipher the words they said, unless I really concentrated and when I did, they were arguing.

"She's a Karstein, Laney, how can you defend her?"

She had her arms out wide. Sinking her knees a little, she pleaded for my life. "Gunfire is not going to solve this. There's another way, Neenan."

But the bullet hadn't come from him. I knew it. It came from the man that stood behind him. Olive skin. Dark hair. Carved wrinkles.

Aldo Novelli.

He was being held back by some guards, his gun must've been thrown to the floor as it lay scuffed and ten feet behind him. His bucking was fruitless, but he was screaming at his usual elevated volume. Over and over. I didn't miss this.

"I knew it. It was her!" He commanded. "Shoot her. At once."

I looked down at my side and back at him dumbfounded. My brain lagged like I was trudging through a humid fog. Sweat formed on my forehead. I had to grab hold of Laney's jacket to stay upright. My weight made her shuffle forward.

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“Sorry.” I whimpered.

“Enough!” The ricochet sound of heavy boots approaching boomed from behind me. A man dressed in tight leather and black straps around his legs walked between Neenan and Novelli, and Laney and me. He looked at Neenan before us. “Sir, get Novelli back to base.”

The young guard tried to protest but before a single word came out his mouth, he was silenced by Grant’s stern face. With the wave of his gun in a haphazard way, Neenan guided the guards with Novelli to a truck that idled to the side of the street. Then, Grant spun to Laney, not daring to meet my eye, but speaking to us both. “And you.” His pointed chin directed at us. “Meet me in my office.”

“How about the hospital?” Laney contended.

“Office. Now.” Then he flicked two fingers in the air and firm hands grabbed my arms pulling them behind my back. The cold of handcuffs clicked around my wrists, the position of my arm grinded into my side, causing a flame of hurt to cascade through my entire body. I groaned as they yanked my body with them to another nondescript van around the corner. Away from Laney and away from Grant. No, Norman. It would take a minute to replace his name in my mind.

Out the corner of my eye I saw their faceoff. But it was less of a faceoff than I expected. He draped an arm around her shoulder and whispered something to her. Her face transformed into shock horror, and she ran with Grant behind her.

A click of a car door distracted me and the rough hands that pulled me into the back

of the car had me seeing stars. I couldn't see the driver but the second the door shut, they pressed on the accelerator so hard, all the air in my lungs left me.

I groaned.

"You alright back there?" A familiar voice made me pause. It couldn't be. Blood rushed my brain causing my head to droop with the weight. "Cat got your tongue?"

"I think the cat got her tongue." Another voice confirmed.

Deep breath in. Deep breath out. "You can't be here." I announced.

"Oh babes, we've been here for a while." Pulling myself into an upright position, I could finally see what I feared.

I shook my head.

"You had a deadline, Kil. Mamma told us to."

"Goddamn it." I groaned. And not from my injury. "She couldn't just trust me."

"This job has taken you longer than most. Honestly, she was more worried about you. You do like to go MIA."

"So, she sent both of you?"

"She's here too!" He said. My jaw was almost on the floor. "Somewhere."

"What? But she shouldn't see action. You know this."

"Have you tried to stop that woman? We gave up."

“You...gave up?” I was shocked. “Idiots.” I spat under my breath.

“The time is now.” Thing One said. Terrence.

“Isn’t that exciting?” Thing Two responded. Malachi. My brothers.

No, no, no, no. We’re not prepared enough. We’re not prepared enough. “We’re not prepared!” I all but screeched as Terrence hit a curb and my vision flashed. “And slow down!”

“Aw, little sis, you worried about me?”

“You do know I got shot, right?” I peeled my red stained fingers from the wound, showing it to them as proof.

“Looks like just a graze to me.” Malachi butted in with a shrug.

“Ugh. We need more time.”

“No,” Terrence’s tone was serious. “Think about it. This is the right time. It’s everything we’ve been building up to, Kilina. You should be excited, the time has come. The last piece of the puzzle.”

“You’re the crux!”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:36 pm*

“What are you so chipper about, Malachi? I’m bleeding out here, shut the fuck up.”

“Someone doesn’t like my optimism.”

“Malachi,” Terrence said in jest. “She’s bleeding in l-o-v-e.”

“Oh yeah, Mama mentioned a girlfriend.”

“A cute one, apparently.”

“Terrence.” I sat up too fast at the same moment the car hit a speed bump. “Shut the fuck up. And drive better!”

I laid back down on the back seat. My side was bleeding less now, I had to stomach the scene at the estate yet. I wasn’t done yet. The pitfalls of the Ravencroft security haven’t been addressed yet. I took out their main defences by undercutting their alliance with the Novelli dynasty and we cut the head off the Ravencroft snake, fracturing leadership. God knew Richard was useless.

My mission was to play reconnaissance on the Ravencroft Estate and kill him too. But once I saw Laney again I couldn’t anymore. Her only parent and without her grandfather? I’d lead her into a chamber with no air holes, and I’d have to leave her in her complete solitude, just to watch her struggle to breath. Mamma always told me to be ruthless. Father taught me how to.

Father is going to be so mad when he sees that I’ve failed.

But that's when it hit me.

What was striking to me most of all was who was missing through this entire ordeal.

Richard Ravencroft was absent.

## Chapter 27

LANEY

As the van approached the estate, thick clouds blocked the sunlight, casting a perpetual darkness upon us like that which had fallen on my heart. When our manor house came into view, its aged brick walls covered in a thick layer of winding ivy, I began to feel somewhat at peace. As if I could leave all the trauma at the gates and return home like nothing happened. But that's not what happened.

Father was shot in the chest. The shock of the impact sent him into cardiac arrest. Dr Borley was at his side now, in this van we all piled into, but the grave expression that marred his face had not shifted in twenty minutes.

I felt in the way. There wasn't much space at the back of the van, so I tucked myself in the corner away from it all. My anxiety hasn't come down this entire ride home. But I was thankful I wasn't crying.

And when we arrived, the situation went from dire to worse. The place was crawling with guards, all in small groups, pacing back and forth. Some groups were led by other guards. This is too many guards. I thought. I was one second away from spiralling.

"Did the Novelli men actually arrive?" I whispered to Neenan in the front seat who was also staring out the window. I knew something wasn't right when his

bewilderment matched mine.

All he did was shake his head, and we exchanged looks of dread. I didn't understand. It seemed that all the drama was in town, why was there commotion here? For all I knew, we were the first to return.

"Who are these people?" I asked.

"I don't know."

It was strange. We didn't hire that many new cadets, did we? The plentiful guards were marching with authority, organised, and I struggled to find a face I recognised amongst them.

"Look, it's Grant!" I rested my finger on the window pointing to his frame as he traversed the circular driveway like a man on a mission. He stopped in front of a group of our guards, conversing sternly, but calm.

I knocked on the window to try and get his attention. It would be good to have some help transferring my father's body from this van into the medical room. God knows, Neenan and I couldn't share the weight between us. We were strong, but not that strong. When the knock didn't work, I waved my hand. If not a sound, maybe the movement could catch his eye.

Instead, he pulled out two guns from his holster, one in each hand and pointed one to each man's head. I didn't hear the shot, just saw their bodies crumple in on themselves.

A wretched noise erupted from my throat.

Out. In. Out. In. Out. Oh my god.



Neenan slapped a hand over my mouth and pushed me down by the shoulders, out of view of the window. “Calm down.”

All it did was make me spiral more.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 4:36 pm*

In. Out. In. Out. Was that even Grant? It can't be.

"Breathe, Laney."

"I can't— he just? Did you not see that?"

"Shhh." He dropped his hand and moved it to the door handle.

"No!" I shout too loud. "No. You can't go out there."

He nodded, tilting his head to the side. "Stay safe, Lane." And he opened the door and ran.

"Neenan, no! Neenan." I hissed too late. The tears that dried on my cheeks were washed away by new ones. God, I hate crying. Why am I always crying? It's so fucking annoying. I wiped my tears away aggressively.

This time I couldn't just sit here and wait for others to sort out the problems of the family. If this was going to be my legacy, I needed to command it.

Dr Borley was doing chest compressions. I choked back the bile that tickled the back of my throat. I bowed my head, praying, pleading, wishing that I wasn't so familiar with loss. His hand felt warm enough when I gripped it and leaned down to whisper in Father's ear. "I'm going to fix this."

"That's not a good idea, Miss Ravencroft." Dr Borley interrupted.

“Was it a question, doctor? Fuck off.”

This wasn't me, but it was going to be. And with that, I opened the door. Neenan was already out of sight, but Grant spotted me immediately. Running toward me with arms outstretched. He wasn't going to slow my momentum, though. If he wanted to fight, he would get it. He helped train me after all.

“Laney, run. Get anywhere away from here.”

I pulled the knives from my thigh. “Tell me the truth. Why did you do that?”

“It can't be stopped, Laney, please. They'll kill you.”

My eyes squinted and flitted down to his uniform. The raven emblem that usually sat on his arm was replaced by a pomegranate. Karstein.

I looked him in the eye. “Was it you this whole time?” Grant had been with us for longer than I had conscious memory. I thought he trusted me. “My whole life.”

He didn't respond. I had my answer. “I wish you no harm.” He said, bowing his head, but it didn't calm me. The guns were still in his hands.

“How many of you are there?”

“The only Ravencrofts left were the ones at the funeral and those that surrendered.” That wasn't a number. “I can count the living on one hand.”

Christ.

I grabbed the emblem off his arm, the ripped material was scrunched in my hand as I turned on my heel and walked toward the house. The country home that held too

many memories.

The door was open, and a pair of men were standing smoking. One of the men had a white substance, powdered on the back of his hand. Obviously, they thought the battle was over. How wrong they were. They looked at me suspiciously before taking another inhale of the powder with a laugh after he saw the material wrapped around my fist.

Too bad he didn't see the knife held there too. I swiped my arm out and neatly sliced both of their throats.

Funny how a line can be lethal.

Party over.

The artwork that decorated my home, that celebrated my family, and me, was destroyed. Canvases torn, glass shattered and stained from the blood that was sprayed all over the floor. It blended with the maroon of the carpet, the smell no less pervading.

Numerous bodies were laid in different conditions and positions on the floor. Considering the smell, some had been here for hours. We only left for the funeral four hours ago, but it was as if the whole world had tilted on its axis and the Ravenscroft had been pushed off its surface before it was set back upright.

I moved through the house, looking around each corner but finding them empty. Well, empty of breathing bodies.

It's funny. I didn't have a major attachment to the house or the people in it but when something so familiar was tarnished, I couldn't help but feel as if I were out of control. As if a chapter on my life was closed before I could finish reading the last

sentence. This was meant to be mine. Not the Karstein's.

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My feet led me to the mess hall. Past the training rooms and the security office that had held some loving memories of Kenna and I, but I guess our chapter ended too. I just hadn't realised it yet. Our memories now tainted too.

The mess hall was nightmare material. Bodies were piled on top of each other, evident holes in each man that laid there. My feet clinked against the metal of the bullet cases that had fallen.

There could only be one culprit to this crime. The Karsteins traded in weaponry and drugs. Their fingerprints are all over the estate. It was revenge at its finest. Did they not know that Grandfather wanted to keep the union? He mourned that loss just as much as losing it to the arrogance of his son. Father lit the match to end it all. He didn't represent the Ravencrofts, I thought to myself, but that wasn't the truth. He was me and I had to face his mistakes. I was his mistake.

I stepped outside to escape the smell. Fear didn't clamber at my lungs like I thought it might. Instead, an eerie acceptance flowed through me.

I'd already lost everything. Everything else that I had was irreparable now.

Men and women with red bands moved rapidly around the back garden. None of them paid me any attention. It was like I was floating between them. Invisible. It hurt more than I'd thought to be ignored by the enemy. I wanted them to scream at me, to invite me to war, so that I could live with the fact that I deserved the loss and not that I was blindsided by their victory. I wanted to earn our downfall.

Moving toward my mother's courtyard, I was struck by the sameness of the forest

hugging the estate. Untouched. Unaware of the horrors that it witnessed. If nothing else, it was a small comfort to know that some things don't change.

I sat in the courtyard, the surrounding brush cocooned me into relative quiet.

This was Kenna's plan. To destroy me. To destroy my entire family's existence like my father did to hers. It's only fair, I guess. But why'd she have to do it like that?

Like a strategy.

Seduce and destroy.

I let out a long breath and put my head in my hands.

In the distance, footsteps and conversations could be heard. I flinched at each major sound but kept my head down. Until two voices came near, but not close enough to prompt me to move. I could hear their conversation crystal clear.

"Is that all of them?"

A slap echoed from the walls of the house, presumably a slap on the back. "We got 'em." The other guy laughed.

"Wow. Didn't take much, huh?"

"Ask our sister, she set the ball rolling to cripple them."

"Pretty neat, yeah."

"Who's still alive?"

“We got Richard and the Novelli guy, Aldo. He’s arguing like a bitch. Richard barely breathes, I got him good.” He chuckled.

“Not good enough. He still breathes, brother.”

“Hey!” There was a shift in fabric. “That was Kilina’s job. She can finish it.”

Oh my god, her brothers. A beat of silence passed.

“Nah, I’m just kidding. Can’t let the fucker go easy, they’re taking him to the Ravencroft torture chamber in the dungeon now.”

“Serves him right.” Another slap could be heard. Maybe a high five? It made me sick.

“What about the cute girl?”

“Don’t know. Haven’t seen her. Though secretly I think Kilina has her hidden in the woods or something.”

“No way. We’d have found her before then.”

“You know what she looks like?”

He scoffed. “I know cute when I see it.”



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“Sure, you do, Malachi. Grow up.”

It didn't sound like there was a bounty over my head, guess that's good. Small mercies.

Another voice entered the mix. A female one. “She's waking.”

“Coming!” Both men shouted in unison.

The quiet of the surrounding nature comforted me again. They've got Father, which means I was right. I lost. Again. Anxiety left my body, and I simmered in the emptiness of it all. What was there to fight for?

I sat with that feeling for a while.

Then, it hit me. No one was looking for me. No one was coming. Might as well see myself out, I thought. It felt silly to stay where I wasn't wanted. I just needed to collect a couple things from my bedroom.

The house was still as deserted as how I found it. Most of the commotion was centred around the barracks at the back of the estate. The wrong emblem was still in my hand as I passed the rooms that came to feel like mine.

My bedroom was entirely untouched.

I kicked my heels off, landing next to the jacket I was going to wear this morning. Times change quickly. My makeup was scattered just as I'd left it. The bed unmade,

how I like it. It still felt mine.

I sat on my bed and looked around to find things that I needed to bring with me. The list wasn't as long as I once thought it would be. I found a small bag and packed my essentials. As I dug around my nightstand, trying to find my favourite hairbrush and collecting an appropriate number of hairbands, a small box fell to the floor.

The one my Mama gave me.

I stuffed it into my duffel bag from the corner, cushioned by my thick jumpers.

When I looked up, I caught myself in the mirror. My knees stained, my makeup smeared, the dark circles that my makeup couldn't hide turned me into the image of melancholy. I turned the mirror around. Defeat wasn't a good look on me.

The jacket was the only redeeming quality of the look. I hugged it to my body before I worked my arms out of the sleeves.

"You can keep it." A voice told me from the door. "You look hot in it."

I squeezed my eyes shut on a long exhale. Hadn't she taken enough? Hadn't I already known for a long time that I'd lost to her? I shrugged the jacket off anyway and held my arm out for her to take it, not daring to turn around to look.

A moment elapsed before either of us said anything more. When she didn't take the jacket, I dropped it. My eyes found hers and she looked pale from where she slumped against the door frame, for once, looking weak.

"It wasn't personal." She admitted. "I promise. Your life doesn't have to end with this, we can rebuild stronger together. Fuck our namesake. Bury it."

“We’re not gonna be the star-crossed lovers.” My hands shook. “I wouldn’t survive.”

“Please.”

“I can’t stay.”

“Laney,” She looked at my hands before her eyes lifted to mine, so sad I had to look away, the look of pity burned. “I think you should stay.”

“You make me worse, Ken–” My voice broke. “Kilina. You betrayed me! You betrayed all of us, don’t you get it? I can’t trust you.”

“I protected you.”

“By destroying everything that meant something to me?”

“It wasn’t personal.” She repeated to no avail. I would drown in defeat amongst the enemy, my loyalty wasn’t that fickle. Even when Grandfather championed the Union, it was unity, not a hostile takeover. This wasn’t civil.

“You got stuck in the mud on the way to the trophy. I get it. You didn’t mean to like me. But leave it with someone else. It doesn’t concern me anymore.”

“You’re not my trophy. You’re my destiny.”

“No, I was Bambi. Fucking naive.” I turned to her. “You know I always thought about you, since secondary school, wondering what it all meant. What you were to me. But the answer to the mystery of you is so much more disappointing than I could ever imagine.”

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“Don’t do this, Laney. We’re not going to hurt you.”

“Too late. I’m leaving.”

“Not without protection, princess.”

“And you’re going to be that for me? Protection.” I scoffed. The nerve of this girl. I did everything to not roll my eyes at her.

She breathed out a ‘yes.’

“Did you kill Neenan too?”

“What? No!” She said, adjusting her weight on her legs and stepped close enough to me to push hair off my shoulder. “No, he handed himself over. You didn’t know? We only killed those who fought.”

“Sorry, I didn’t hear, I was kinda busy watching my life fall apart.” I’m fighting now, are you going to kill me too?

“Princess, I freed you.”

“Don’t ‘princess’ me! Don’t pretend to know me. Get Neenan.”

“He’s on our side now.”

“Thought you wanted to protect me? That’s the only way.”

“Laney...I care.”

“Well, I don’t. Not anymore.” It was a lie, it was a lie. “Leave.”

“No! No. You have to be with me, loving me, until the end, or hate me and still be with me, hating me through everything. Indifference isn’t an option for me. Stay.”

I shut my eyes.

“No.” I said. “Go be with your family.”

She didn’t move.

“I’m leaving.” I affirmed. “When I collect my things from the bathroom, Neenan better be standing here instead of you.” Without another glance, I brushed past her and left her there.

When I returned, she was gone. It still stung. A minute later, Neenan was at my door, looking shaken but okay. Thank God, he was okay.

“Do you want to get out of here?” I asked him, tears brimming.

He swallowed hard and deftly nodded.

When we finally left, our first steps were confident. Defiant.

But a mile away from the house, a cauterising loneliness crept into me again.

Chapter 28

KILINA

Blood over love, isn't that right? The thought beat into my head over and over again.

It had to end.

That was how I had to justify it in my head so that I could take the next step. The next breath. Why did I fall for the one girl I never could have? And why was I more mature at fourteen than now?

I stood next to the firepit, staring at the small fire I had stocked. The Raven emblem on the uniform glowed before it melted into the flames. My stare was so intense I didn't hear approaching footsteps.

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When I looked up at who it was, they just stared back blankly. “Hmm?”

“I said, can you log us into the security server?”

“Hmmm,” I nodded. I poked the fire with a stick. Couldn’t I get a moment alone?

“You shouldn’t be standing.” My older brother dragged me into a seat next to where he sat, too close to the fire. His knees were almost in the flames at his proximity to the flames, so it must feel like his kneecaps were melting, but then again, Terrence did always throw himself headfirst into taking interest in the interests of others. His melting knees were the closest I’d get to an ‘I love you.’ It was the Karstein way. The same way that I hadn’t noticed the rupture of my wound seeping blood into my shirt until now.

“Did she really leave?” He finally said.

I sighed. “Yeah.”

“That’s tough.”

Real insightful and inspiring words. Thanks, brother. I wanted to quip, but he didn’t deserve that. I made my bed.

Instead of saying anything, my eyes drifted from the firepit to the seats around it. The night that Neenan and Laney were sitting here painting each other's nails felt more distant than the mere weeks it was. Things were so different. It was hard to believe only a day had passed.

“She seemed nice,” he offered, but I knew his true feelings. Her name alone had him believing good riddance, he was just too kind to me to say it. For that, I was grateful. There were no victors in conflict, both sides always lose something. Or everything.

I grimaced for her. I couldn’t stand to think of her much longer. “What did you want again?”

He cleared his throat. “The previous security head officer installed a kill safe that erased all data from the common server so we can only access the one in the security office, but it’s encrypted.” It was the Cove. Laney. I wanted to throw my head into the fire. “Do you know how to access it?”

“I have a log in, but I can’t guarantee it’ll work.” I attempted to sound more enthused, but it just came out plain. Prodding the fire aimlessly with a stick, it dawned on me. The security office. Our security office. Wait. No. “Can we pull the computer from the office?”

He looked at me perplexed and hesitated a response. “I don’t think that’s necessary, we should leave it like the former head of sec—”

“Please.”

“Kilina, we can’t unplug things.” Our eyes met, an orange hue coating our skin. “Why don’t you want to go in there?”

“Just don’t like dark spaces.” I muttered.

“Huh?”

“Nothing. I got it.” I threw the stick into the fire and walked away. “Let’s go.”



When I got to the office it wasn't empty. A figure sat in the shadows of the dark room, only the glare of the screen silhouetted his head giving him a halo that he definitely didn't deserve.

"Well, I'm here." I announced with a sigh.

"Cheerful too."

Irvine Karstein swung the chair around to face me, stood and let me replace where he'd been seated before leaning over so close we shared breath.

I forced out a cough. "Space."

Dad inched back and punched at the keyboard. "Show me how to get onto this godforsaken computer, Kilina."

"You couldn't ask the other informants you sent after me."

"They're not you." He stroked my hair. "You might not think so, but I care for my daughter."

I pursed my lips with a raised eyebrow. "The others didn't get past initiation?"

"Well, the rest weren't cosyng up to the boss' daughter."

Can't argue there. Even if the thought pushed me further toward the edge of something tall. Turning my gaze to the screen, I saw the angry red text that had rejected my dad's attempts at surpassing the interface.

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The same red text flashed when I input my log in. Strange.

I tried again.

Red.

I slammed my hand on the desk in frustration. “What are you even looking for? What do you need this for?”

“During the Union we kept tapes of everything, every angle that you could view this estate was covered by CCTV and backed up in a file log. In it, we can find leverage, blackmail, what have you but also—”

“The tape of the fire.”

“Exactly.” Daddy said as he leaned closer, breathing heavier. I threw my shoulder back, but he just clamped a hand down on it and held me still.

“Those files are kept in the Cove.”

I tried once more.

Rejected.

Hmmm, I didn’t have high clearance. I casted my mind back to training but only fantasies of Laney and I walking into this very office popped in my head. God, I missed the distraction.

If only I knew Laney's password. She created the Cove which held all the top priority surveillance files and data that would be essential to sealing the Ravencroft fate. That was what Dad was after, and as I typed in Laney's credentials, he yelled, "Yes!" close to my ear. I tried my best to suppress a flinch.

The only problem was that I didn't have the password. I was a bit too distracted the last time I was here. My numerous attempts flashed red in my face. I tried her favourite books, members of the Ravencroft family, her friends. Her first pet's name. Me.

With each attempt, a red glow penetrated my sight.

I pictured Laney in my head, fighting hard to not think too much about the wrong things in front of my dad. This security office. The back garden. The feel of her breath on my ear at target practice. The plume of the Egyptian cotton of her sheets. My hand on her throat. Trailing my lips on her skin down the valley of her breasts. Her skin. Her tattoo. Tattoos.

On the inside of her wrist was a date in roman numerals.

V/V/MMI

I typed it in. Wrong.

Dad groaned.

"You know you're not helping, right?" I snapped.

He just grumbled but thankfully, stepped back.

I tried the date again but only using numbers. Wrong. Then the date in words. Wrong.

It was her birthdate. “My mother died in childbirth.” No, it was her mother’s death date.

I typed: Mother2001

Wrong.

Then, after a few combinations, I typed: VVMama1

Bingo.

?

The victorious feeling didn’t arrive the next morning, it just felt like it was yesterday. Before my family ransacked the entire place and took it over. The hallways went in the same directions, the gaps between the windows still let in a draft, and a parent ate breakfast with their child on the front facing balcony.

“We can’t keep him much longer.”

“He doesn’t deserve the mercy of death. Let him struggle to breathe a bit longer.”

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“Kil, his presence holds us back from properly starting over. A clean slate. He wouldn’t think twice if it were you.”

“There’s time.” I dismissed.

“He can barely stutter a word. Darling, his condition is worsening by the hour, keeping him alive just means more urine all over the floor. I’d rather we end his miserable life than mother nature be the one.”

“I guess.”

“And I want you to do it.”

My head snapped up. “No!” Death had ruined the innocent more than the guilty, and even then, I wouldn’t take the opportunity away from Laney or my dad. God, he had to hide his family because of him. He deserved this. “I can’t do it. I won’t.”

“This was your one mission. As far as I’m concerned it still hasn’t ended until his elimination.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want another death on my hands.”

“And you think I do? I don’t enjoy this. I didn’t want this. This war started with them. End. It.”

“What about their revenge, Dad?” I burst out. “Did you even think about that? They killed us, so we killed them, is that how it works! Is that justice? We’ll just end up in

a cycle of killing and revenge. You taught me to be strong. How to defend myself. But I always end up broken. I don't want to be a killer. I don't want to be responsible for it anymore. God, if you only knew the abuse that I've suffered for this family."

Heat rose to the surface of my skin, as I writhed my hands together with such vigour I shook the table.

"Oh, don't look so guilty now." He slammed his hand on the table. "What's changed, huh? You feel sympathy for the poor sod." His hand waved in the air with heavy strokes. "You lost your strength in this house, girl. Is that it? You lost your heart here?"

"Never."

"Then end it."

I bit the inside of my cheek and placed both hands on the table as I stood, but he stood just as fast and grabbed a fistful of my jacket, keeping me in place and far too close.

"This house made you soft, Kil? The Ravencrofts made you weak?" He spat. "Or was it the Ravencroft girl?" I clenched my fist. "Disgusting that you would give her a second glance. You should know better. I could hardly believe your mother when she told me." He tapped a finger on my chest, over my heart. "Did you spend so much time between the legs of the enemy that you forgot that you have Karstein blood in your veins? Sucked your clit so hard that you screamed 'Ravencroft' at your climax?"

My hand covered my mouth to withhold the vomit that sprung up from my stomach. It was mostly stomach acid, and it burned. I'd mostly lost my appetite since the raid and takeover. With his words in my head, I was sure to not eat for the rest of the week.

“Ravencroft pussy clouded your judgement.” He concluded with a sharp nod. “Don’t let her near me when I see her, or she’ll share a fate like her father’s.”

“She’s already gone.”

He seemed surprised but was no less stern. “Good.” I almost breathed a sigh of relief, but I could tell from a glint in his eye that daddy wasn’t finished. “Unless,” he turned to face me, eye to eye, “You kill him. Then I won’t harm a single hair on her head.” He held up his pinky to me.

“Fine.” I stepped away. “But in my own time. Let him suffer.”

“Kilina!” He shouted after me, but I was already back inside.

Later that night, I stood outside the cell where Richard Ravencroft laid. The smell was pungent, and a dampness clung to the walls. Otherwise, there was relative quiet in the dungeon. This was the first time I’d been down here.

My back slid down the wall opposite his room until it met the cold concrete, and I moved a gun from hand to hand across my lap. It wasn’t like I was fighting some moral battle in my mind, more so, I was juggling a sense of justice. For both my family and my— Laney.

She was gone. I didn’t need to factor her into the goings on in the house anymore, but I felt I owed her. There was an innocence to her presence here, as if she was a prisoner in this place. Her existence was tied to this house. I wanted her to experience life outside of it.

But really, I needed her safe. Daddy had made it clear that there was no place in this house for a Ravencroft. Her home wasn’t hers anymore. Her existence couldn’t be defined by it. God, I missed her.

Now that the ultimate goal of the Karstein mission had been fulfilled, it was like something in me was left unsatisfied. A pit in my gut that I thought would rejoice at our victory, but it was an incomplete circle, the pit floor descending lower than rock bottom.

An hour passed before I came out of my thoughts, Malachi stood light on his toes looking through the small window of the cell door. When he fell back on his heel, he noticed me waking from my mind.

“Isn’t it cool?”

My eyebrows tightened inward.



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His lifted. “Having the enemy in the palm of your hand? Isn’t that thrilling?”

“Well,” I shrugged. “It’s not my first.”

“Too true, Kil, you were our breadwinner.”

One side of my mouth lifted but it was sad. All my life I threw myself into these missions, swearing up and down that I was capable, and I was, yet I always thought I’d find some relief from completing each mission. However, after each job, I returned emptier than the last time and already itching for the next one.

Maybe next time. After this one. When it’s done.

None of those words brought me comfort. I hung my head between my shoulders.

“So, like,” Malachi began, “Aim for the head?”

I jumped up. “What?!” Then, I saw the gun in his hand. “No.”

“It’s my job!”

“Well, Daddy thinks you’re kinda slacking at your job, so he sent me.” He seemed oddly proud of that.

I covered his hand on the gun with mine. “You can’t.”

“But—”

“No, not yet.” No solid reason came to me, just that it didn’t feel right. “Let him suffer a bit more.”

“Come on, Kil, he’s basically braindead in there.” He swung the gun around carelessly out of my grip.

“Hey, hey,” I held up my hands. “Malachi, careful, I will take care of it.”

“Kilina, Daddy lost his patience with you. You already failed the family by not shooting him already. It could’ve been a far less bloody takeover if you had.”

“Don’t tell me that!” My voice fraught with desperation. “You don’t understand.”

“You know,” He interrupted. “I always thought I’d have to psyche myself up more to take a life, but there’s no weight on my shoulders here.” His eyes darkened as his shoulders paralleled mine. “You know why?”

Can I be anywhere else, please. I didn’t respond.

“He didn’t think twice about us.”

My eyes fell shut. I knew the truth.

“Flicked that match like it was an ordinary Tuesday afternoon. Should we ask grandmother what she thinks about this?”

“No,” I mumbled.

“That’s right, I can’t, because she’s fucking dead. You saw the tape.”

That woke me up. “Malachi, Malachi, I can do it. Please, just give me one day.”

“I don’t trust you.” He admitted. Our eyes met. Malachi had always had faith in me, his disbelief pulled a needle from a grenade and a tear fell from my eye.

“One day,” I promised. “One day and his guts will be five miles away from his head. Please.”

“Okay.”

The gun clattered on the floor and discharged on contact.

I didn’t scream. Barely flinched. The bullet clinked on the concrete. Through blurred vision, I saw Malachi walk away from me. The disappointment crushing.

### Chapter 29

#### LANEY

"She'd take you back," Neenan said for the fourth time since we left the Ravencroft Estate. No day went past where she didn't enter my mind, Neenan made sure of it. We were staying at an inn over a pub in the neighbouring village Oxenwood. "After I left you in that van, I met one of our guys, a guy named Sorren, he vowed my safety if I align myself with them. They weren't killing indiscriminately."

The only image in my head was of my hand fisting the pomegranate band feeling at a loss and like I'd been relentlessly run over by a lorry. Not a bird in the sky. Does it really matter if it wasn't indiscriminate when it was my family that they were targeting? Granddaddy, Tilly, Flavia Novelli, for all intents and purposes, Father.

"No lives needed to be lost. This was only ever about revenge."

"And Kenna?"

"The greatest revenge of all."

"You don't believe that?" He said, but his words were distant, he was being more talkative than usual, and it was always the same topics. It wasn't what I called a good distraction, I didn't need the reminder of what I lost.

"I have to, Neenan." The drum of loud music shook the floorboards under us, it was karaoke night downstairs. Thankfully, the bass drowned out the singing. "Can we talk

about something else?”

For a moment, there was a harmony to the place we were in. The pub was between songs. The conversation was between talking points. The distant church bells paused between rings. When it all started up again, though, I cringed.

“Bad migraine?”

I nodded. “Throbbing at the exact rate as my heart palpitates.”

He looked at me blankly. “That bad?”

I offered him a weak smile, but it took effort. The last couple days had been slow, all the options for our next steps came so fast it confined me to stasis. It’s funny that the moment I lost all my attachments, I felt the most free I’d ever been but also the most confined.

Only two bags left the estate on our body, but the number of things scattered about the place would make you think otherwise. One thing caught my eye in particular. The box my mother gave me.

Neenan followed my gaze.

“Are you going to open it?”

I was building myself up to it. Marriage was the last thing on my mind, but I wished for some words of comfort right about now, so I grabbed it from my nightstand and just held it. It felt heavier in my hand than I’d thought. The musical vibrations below us were drowned out by the gravity of the moment.

I didn’t know much about her, and I was the reason Father never talked about her. It

was a weight that I carried with me every day and something that my father saw in my face each day too. Having this little piece of her was a treasure to me, to open it was to let it go. But with the current times, I needed to end every mystery in my life, and this was a big one.

What message would my mother have wanted me to receive upon marriage? Inspiration? To learn from her mistakes? I wasn't sure.

"Can I?" I asked as if Mother was in the room with us. In some ways, it felt like she was the only one close. Minus Neenan, of course, but he was such a permanent feature in my life that he felt as solid as the earth we stood on.

He insisted.

Fear rocked me for a moment. "What if it's bad?"

"What if it's good?"

"What if it's not?"

"What if it's great?"

I had to believe him. He was only a little older than me, but sometimes I think he knows things about me that I didn't. As if his father had all the stories about my parents that Father refused to divulge. Sometimes I wished for his perspective. But wait—

"Your father! Is he okay?"

He swallowed hard. My heart plummeted. I didn't even ask him. Dammit. Too self-absorbed to even consider that my family wasn't the only one affected. Stupid girl.

“Uhh...” The words seemed to lodge in his throat. I didn’t need them anyway. I threw myself at him, arms wide and tight as they wrapped around his shoulders. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. So sorry.”

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His arms returned the hug. Yet, he still didn't say anything when he withdrew.

"After the funeral," He stumbled, "His body was found in the med bay at the barracks."

My hands covered my mouth. Forrester Waite was a friend of my grandfather's, faithful to the Ravencrofts but a stern protester of the fissure. The disagreement brought Edward and him together, but he and my father were stretched further apart.

I wanted to cry for him. "That's horrible, Neenan. I wish I could take your pain away, I know how it feels."

But his response was the last thing I'd expected. He laughed. But not in a humorous way, it was sinister. "You know exactly what I feel." He scoffed, his eyes darkening. "Glad you finally realised."

I blinked repeatedly, but continued, earnest. "I-I-I can't tell you how devastating it is to find out—"

The blood in his cheeks rose to the surface in a way that I feared was shame before I saw the flames behind his eyes. "Don't start." He spat and stood towering over me. Then, his shoulders fell. "You never see me, Laney. We share more than just proximity, but you always just saw right through me, wallowing in your own self-pity too much to see that I was just as isolated as you!"

He was as alone as me. How did it take so long for me to see?



“You think you were the only one to grieve your grandfather, huh? Edward was a grandfather to me too!” He continued his tirade, getting increasingly more flustered as the words tumbled out his mouth. “And all this time you were too selfish to see it! Always busy with your oh Kenna this, and oh Kenna that. It’s bullshit.” He stressed the carpet as he walked back and forth in the room.

“What? Am I only a burden to you? An obligation that you are too weak to put aside. Talk to yourself!” I fought back in a yell.

Regret found me a minute after I had caught my breath. All he wanted was a friend who listened. It was obvious in his outburst, but he was right, I was too self-absorbed to notice his cry for help.

So, I sat in front of where he was pacing, perfectly still. With that, he calmed until his worrying steps slowed to a simple stride. After a minute, he finally slumped down to sit beside me.

“Do you want to know the worst part?” Words turned to sobs as he averted his gaze to the floor. “He’d been dead for days. I was too busy escorting you around to raise the alarm at his absence.”

I wrapped an arm around him, and I was grateful when he leaned his weight onto my side. “I didn’t know,” I said in a gentle tone. “I should’ve been there for you. I’m sorry.”

He brushed his hand up the back of his head, standing one more. “God, I should just go.”

“I forgive you.”

“It’s too late. I did this, you don’t—”

“I forgive you.” I repeated as I saw the mental battle play out on his face. He had to know I meant it. “Please, stay.”

“I’m sorry.” He said as he shut his eyes and leaned back onto the bed, our upper thighs still touching.

“We can go into the woods, light a fire, and roast some marshmallows,” I suggested with a tight smile. I might’ve been blind to his feelings, but I always listened to his words. “In his honour.”

I pulled back from the contact. The distant look in his eyes made me believe he wasn’t listening, but he eventually nodded. I didn’t cry for him, though, my reserve of tears was used up.

So, when Neenan prompted. “Go on. I’d do anything to have a box like that from him. Please.” Pointing at it. “Open it.” And I lifted the lid to find a USB stick and a letter, still, not a single tear fell.

We had both lost a lot this week, not least our sanity, but we still had each other. I had to do a good job to remember that. He nodded at me as I fiddled with the edges of the paper. The encouragement fuelled me, and I knew all would be alright with us. Now, perhaps, we could rebate a little of what we lost.

I unfolded the letter and started reading. As the words sunk in, a weight dropped in my stomach, heavier than anything else I’d felt. Mama.

?

I may have stolen a bottle of red wine from the pub downstairs. Or several.

In a fit of giggles, Neenan and I had fallen down on the first step of the back stairs.

Stairs were scary so we dared not go up them. Especially not like this, I'd never been drunk before. Tilly and I indulged in the odd bottle of wine, but we never took it this far. My head felt heavy, but it came with a freedom that I hadn't anticipated. I thought being intoxicated would be disarming, not freeing. It felt weird. Good, but weird.

"Did you..." I laughed before I got the words out. "See her?"

His eyes were glazed. "What?" He shouted comically loud.

I groaned with a smile. "You're so drunk."

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“No,” He hiccupped, swirling a finger in the air in my direction. “You are. What?”

“Me?”

“Yup.” He popped.

I shook my head. He didn’t like that.

“No, Lanes, what did you see?” He sat up straight to prove it, the move gained him such momentum he swayed a little.

I raised my eyebrows.

“I’m waiting for an answer.” He continued.

I controlled my breathing to say it in one breath. “Did you see her?” I laughed but wanted to cry. It hurt to swallow. “In the bathroom that time?”

“At school?”

“Yes.”

A moment elapsed and it was like he sobered himself in an instant. “No, just you.” Sadness befell his face like a weight had pulled down his features. “In the dark.”

“Did...” I couldn’t find the right words. “Did you think I was lying?”

“Never.” Pulling my hand into his lap, he warmed them between both his hands. “I was worried...” The concern in his expression told me he still was.

I felt the words before I heard them.

“You were seeing things.” He wouldn’t meet my eye. I was fine. “You were sick.”

No. My hand slipped out of his grip, and it was like the room filled with water, robbing me of the vitality of air. “You still don’t believe me.” I realised.

All this time, it was just pity. He stayed close because he felt sorry for me.

“And Father?”

He hesitated to answer. “Why do you think he let you leave your marriage so easily?”

I shook my head continuously, my tear ducts were dry but stung all the same. He said he accepted my reasoning, accepted me. He said he supported me. Was it all sympathy? Some misplaced pity. I had an anxiety attack, sure, an identity crisis, most definitely, but there was no doubt about my reality. I thought he trusted me to know myself. Was it all an act?

It wasn’t true. In the forest with Aldo, he took me seriously. The Karsteins had clocked onto us years before we realised it, he had to have changed his mind. He made the bed for their presence to be undetected.

I am fierce. I am capable. Now it seems only one person actually believed that.

I made a mistake.

With renewed vigour, and only a little liquid courage, I shot up. I fell back on the

banister as my head filled with blood. When my vision returned soon after, I was already running.

Damn Neenan.

And damn Father.

## Chapter 30

KILINA

Her cheeks were red and wet from the rain.

It had been days since I'd last seen her, and while she had been the only thing on my mind through my recovery from the bullet graze, I had begun to wallow in my loss. It was why I was in the same black sweatpants I'd been for several days, and I was without my chains, yet she matched my dishevelled aesthetic.

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With drenched clothes she stood in front of me. Speech slightly slurred but her words came out decisive and strong. What the fuck is she doing here looking like that?

“I walked.” She was far too nonchalant for a girl that just walked three miles in a dark forest.

“How did you get past the gates?”

Tilting her head, she gave me a dumbfounded look as if to say duh.

I blinked repeatedly. Honestly, that left me more bewildered than I cared to understand. She was at my bedroom door, the very same bedroom I’d been staying in this whole time. Some of my family has moved into the barracks, many of them old enough to remember this house from before the fissure. It held memories that I couldn’t even imagine. Only the younger people were willing to stay in the house.

Regardless of the history this house held, the last few days had been slow.

It felt like the victory was so great that we remained stuck in the smoke of the fireworks. Like this plan had been so long in the making that I’m not sure Daddy or Mama thought beyond the takeover.

Guards walked in circles trying to outline the many acres of land. My brothers were transferring operations from our underground base in Bilham to the Ravencroft Estate, now renamed and reclaimed as the Karstle. Well, that was Malachi’s idea. I voted for the Karstein estate. Simple.

Too many thoughts swirled in my mind to even anticipate Laney showing up at my door. No less drunk. And...forgiving?

“How much have you had to drink?”

“One or two.” She gave a firm nod.

“Glasses?”

A smile graced her lips. “Bottles.”

Oh shit. “How much of this are you going to remember?”

“Don’t patronise me. I’m only a little tipsy.” Her brows furrowed. “Not even. Less than drunk. The wind should be advertised as a hangover cure the way it woke me up.” Then, she dropped her shoulders and leaned into the door frame. “...I’m so tired.”

“I bet.”

She rolled from the doorway forward, almost kissing the floor if I hadn’t caught her. I held her in my arms, her rosy cheeks were cold to the touch, I tried not to flinch when she wrapped her cool skin around me. The bullet graze made it difficult for me to bend, the pressure of her in my arms cauterising the wound anew, but the heat that entered my heart soothed the burn.

Selfishly, I nuzzled my face between her head and shoulder. A slot perfectly made for my face to sit. She smelled as I remembered lavender and lemongrass. My knees sank to the floor as I held her.

“Thank you,” she whispered into my hair.



“For what, princess?”

“For listening to me.”

A piece of me was warmed, and another piece was saddened by that thought. It seemed to me that Laney was stuck between two worlds, the one where she could freely expose her innermost feelings and the one where she could ruthlessly cut a man’s balls from his body. Did it ever occur to her that she could be both? My poor, misunderstood girl. Wait, no—

“This,” I had to proceed with caution. “...doesn’t change anything.”

Her breathing had finally evened, but she held tight to me. “Shhhh.”

“I’m serious. You were right. I...” Words were difficult, especially when they fought against the wills of my heart. “Please, just...” I didn’t complete the thought. We should rest first, it was the wee hours of the morning. My brain lagged. “Never mind.”

“Spit it out.” Her tone remained soft despite the stern words. “Don’t baby me, I can handle it.”

I was taken aback. “I know you can, princess. You’re much stronger than me.” I said, stroking her hair gently down her back. “It’s just that my eyes are fighting for their lives to stay open right now. Let’s leave it for tomorrow.”

She didn’t move from our embrace. “Okay. And Father?”

“He’s okay.” For now. “We should sleep.”

Still, she remained still, but in the quietest voice, said, “We?”

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I slowly nodded, loosening my arms around her. “We.”

She fell back on her heels.

I pointed a finger at her and tapped her nose. “Don’t make me regret it.”

She smiled. “Well, don’t hog the covers then.”

“Pinky swear.”

I dare not tell her that her bedroom was untouched next door as I pulled down my duvet and wrapped her up in the warmth.

?

It took a while to register that the voice coming from outside the door was real, and not just in my dream. The warmth of my bed was blissful. Damn these rich folks for investing in the good stuff. This was certainly the best bed I’ve ever slept on. Just as I began to drift again, the voice returned louder.

“Kk, it’s almost twelve! Give me a sign of life or I’m sending dad in!”

I sat up so quickly that I was flung back down into the mattress by the arm that held me down like a seatbelt. Father definitely couldn’t find this. “I’m awake! I’m awake, promise!” A groan came from beside me. Softly, I whispered to Laney, “Let me go, I won’t leave, promise.” It was enough to get her to loosen her grip.

“Come to lunch, Mum wants to speak to you. Ten minutes. Okay?”

My head was fuzzy when I got to my feet. If I wore white more often, I’d never stop doing laundry because of the amount of clothing I’ve stained by the blood. Each movement opened the scab. It was the itch that was more irritating than the sting.

I took my top off as I looked down at the floor to find an outfit to wear. Tight jeans were out of the question. My leather jacket was too hard of a material. Just this once, I wished cosy jumpers were my aesthetic. Leggings and a jumper were the way to go.

I had got one leg in my leggings when there was a knock at the door.

“Coming!” I shouted. Laney groaned, still face planted into her pillow.

“Now, Kilina.”

This family. I grit my teeth, trying not to sound angry. “I’m getting changed!”

A sock was stuck in the other leg of the leggings, I punched my foot to shift it, but it was a struggle. I breathed hard and yanked it up over my knee.

Then, the door clicked open. Mothers.

“I said I was coming.”

She looked disapproving at my disarray, only seeming sympathetic when she noticed my flinch. “I can help, you know, here,” she said, coming to my side to hold me steady as I pushed the leggings over my hips. “The top?”

I pointed aimlessly toward a black shirt that laid beside my bed. A turtleneck. Black. It’ll do. I sat on the vanity chair to catch some breath. My body hurt. “What did you

want to talk to me about?" Might as well start the discussion early.

Sleep still clouded my eyes. Man, I need more sleep. Or less excitement in my life. Somehow it didn't feel right without it.

Mummy usually couldn't go one minute without inserting her opinion into something, the quiet was unusual. Thankfully, Laney was still sound asleep.

"Mummy?"

That's when I looked up.

She was frozen at my bedside, her eyes unmoving from something on the bed.

Laney. Shit.

"It's not what it looks like."

She lifted her gaze to me. "You said it was over. That's not what it looks like."

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“It was. Is.” I stood back up, a pain sliced through my side.

“I knew you were warming the bed for the Ravenscroft girl, but still? Have you no sense of loyalty?”

I didn’t answer. Laney rolled on her back as she began to stir, but my eyes remained firmly on mummy’s.

“Don’t.” I said. “I’ll fix it.”

She shook her head. “I’ve told you many times, Kilina. Don’t let lust distract you from the family.”

“This was a temporary lapse in judgement. Trust me, Mummy.” I prayed Laney wasn’t coherent enough to realise those words. It broke my heart.

Mummy gave me an unbelieving look as she passed me on the way to the door.

“I’ll end it,” I said, softly. “For real.”

“She’s not welcome here.”

“I know.”

“All we’ve worked for...” She slowly shook her head, standing at the door. “I want them gone, Kilina. Make sure of it.”

When I came to the lunch table ten minutes later, where my whole family sat, I knew they knew. I promised Laney I wouldn't be long. I was wrong. Daddy wasn't looking my way.

"Your one day is up." Malachi said, the cheery tone from earlier was replaced by monosyllabic punches. "You need to kill him."

I chose my next words carefully. "I'll do it." Terrence rolled his eyes, I clenched my fists. "Richard wasn't a leader, he was just a puppet. Nothing significant. Edward was the big thinker, believe me." But it didn't matter, did it?

Tension grew. No one moved.

"Why are you protecting him?" Daddy said.

"I'm not!"

"Then why are we delaying it?" Malachi challenged.

Mother pointed a finger at me. "Are you sleeping with him too?"

I looked disgusted. "No!"

"Then why?"

Don't say her name. Keep her from scrutiny. Don't say her name. "It's just... he needs to suffer for all the harm he caused. Death is too easy. That's all"

Terrence finally spoke. "He's the last pillar of our takedown, Kilina. He should've been killed a week ago. Be honest. Please."

I let the quiet speak for me for a minute. I couldn't come up with a defence quick enough.

"Speak of the devil," Malachi said under his breath, eyes over my shoulder.

I turned in my seat. Laney stood in the doorway. Paused. Out of earshot. No one objected to her presence on the estate. I could breathe a sigh of relief. Thankful that they didn't also consider her a loose end. "She's not a factor in this."

"She's the only factor in this." Malachi said.

"I want her gone. Kill them both."

"Daddy, please."

"Don't get distracted, Kil, I warned you. Attachments are burdens. Kill them. We've lost too much to them."

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“She didn’t do anything wrong! She’s like me, she didn’t choose her family.” I pleaded. He returned a look not to be argued with. “Fine,” I said. Defeated.

“No, not fine.” Daddy finally met my eye and stood. “Give him a bloody death, you are right to make him suffer.”

“He deserves nothing less.” Terrence joined him.

Something had changed. The air was thicker, their voices more impassioned. “What happened?”

I’d never seen Terrence as pitiful as now. “We found the tape. Of the fire.”

“It was him.” Daddy confirmed. “He is responsible for the massacre.”

“What?” If I had known that it was him personally, there would be multiple bullets in his skull the moment he entered my field of vision. I was too emotionally tied up now. “Why?” I breathed.

“Torture it out of him!” Malachi said, cheer returning.

“We don’t know.” Dad said. “Find out for us. Do it for the family you never got to meet, Kilina, for the childhood home you never had, or I will do it for you.”

But I failed to understand. Richard was a child back then, how could he start a civil war if he wasn’t there to lead it? I shook my head.



We killed the wrong man. I realised. I still had the chance to serve justice. "I'll do it."

I grew motivated by their faith in me. The ruthless energy that had mellowed bubbled back up. This place hadn't made me soft, it made me care. This was what revenge was made of.

I walked to Laney, stopping an inch too close to her. "We're ending this."

"Let me say goodbye, Kenna." Kenna? I'm not playing that character anymore. She grabbed my hand and tugged until my eyes met hers. "Please."

With an abrasive pace, I clamped down on her hand and dragged her toward the dungeon door, just beyond it laid her father's soon-to-be deathbed.

Laney fought for her hand back as the door slammed shut behind us, enclosing us between damp walls. "I can't."

"You'll feel better after this, I promise." Once through the next set of doors the temperature dropped five degrees, and a clinging dampness cinched onto my body. Rounding the corner after the door banged shut behind us, I pushed her up against a wall, my hand firmly pressing her chest.

I would give her one chance to say goodbye to her villain of a father. They wanted me to torture him into a confession, but she could do it better. She deserved the closure, maybe even more than us.

"I'm giving you the privilege to say goodbye to your father. And after that, you leave. For real. I can't save you if you don't."

"No, I came back! That was my decision, you can't take that from me!"

“You don’t have that choice anymore, Laney. This house has changed, I’ve changed. It has to end.”

“So, all this time, it wasn’t real? Last night?”

“It was fantasy.” Her face angered. “I wanted it to be real, but it could never be. I’m not Kenna, I never was.”

“You’re lying to me.” I held strong. Commanding my body to assume the most intimidating stance I could muster, making my body a threat to her. It pained me to see her cower, but I had to do this. This wasn’t something we could resolve.

A suppressed shiver shook my body, when she puffed her chest out, briefly making skin to skin contact. It was as much of a lie as it was a truth. The blood coursing through my veins felt like it had needles in it.

Instead of giving a response, I turned on my heel. Leaving her. I knew it was her weakness.

“Okay, okay!” She followed in a haste. “I’ll go, just let me say goodbye first. Please.”

“Okay,” I said. Our steps synced up as we strode parallel to each other until we reached his door.

Richard had been basically comatose the entire time he was held here. Delayed medical intervention, and then, no intervention derailed his mind. On the days he did open his eyes they stared blankly at the ceiling. His death would be easy.

Laney rushed into the room, when I brought her to his cell. “Father.”

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He looked pale with sunken features and dried spit on his jaw. It was hard to imagine him in the position that he used to be. Right now, he looked anything other than fearsome.

“Oh my god, Father.” She fussed with his hands, squeezing them softly over and over. It was hard to tell what their relationship looked like. Half the time she hated him, other times she was desperate for his presence. It was toxic at best, parental at worst.

The whistle in his breath indicated that he was still alive. But barely. He laid on the ground in the same funeral garb he’d worn when he was shot. The hole of the bullet provided a clear window to inspect his wound. It was gnarly, and browned.

A doctor had stemmed the bleeding quite efficiently before he was pulled off him by Karstein guards and dragged away. Richard had been here ever since. I hoped he was drowning in his own self-pity, but in the back of my mind, I already knew he had the mercy of ignorance in his sickened mind.

After her goodbyes, he’d be gone quick.

Laney pulled a chair from the guard station just outside the room, the metal dragged on the floor, and it echoed.

His eyes began to flutter open at the sound. He still had that blank stare on his face that I’d grown accustomed to in his state. It took a while for him to notice there were people in the room, but when he did his eyes widened and stuck on me.

“Can you hear me?” Laney said with gravel in her voice but alert. “Squeeze my hand, if yes.”

No movement came. Her hope faded.

She leaned over him, towering over his field of vision from where he laid on the floor. I couldn't decipher the next words, only his expression. It went from surprise to anger, though, the cardiac arrest had muted these shifts to be subtle. I moved closer to hear, but I only caught the latter end of the sentence.

“...everything, Father. There's no one left.”

His eyes remained on me. And he mouthed one word. Karstein.

Laney looked up at me, at a loss, but I knew. I was his worst fear.

I shrugged her, while I tightened my grip on the gun in my hand. “Say goodbye.”

Her shoulders dropped. “Father, I...”

Galen. He mouthed again. To me.

“What?” Laney said. “No, it's me.”

I shook my head. Galen Karstein. My dead uncle perished in the fire.

“Fuck you.” Richard suddenly said. He lifted his head off the floor, but he didn't get far.

“What? Father, calm down. It's over. I told you.”

He cleared his throat, lifting his hand from Laney's grip. "Get out."

Look who had a brain after all. "No can do, Richie."

"Kilina, stop agitating him. He's already weak."

"He can speak for himself."

"I need a moment alone with my daughter. Leave." He said with such confidence that my eyebrows shot up. Was he faking this entire time?

"I don't answer to you." I responded.

Laney scooted closer, "I opened Mother's letter."

His eyes flit toward her, eyebrows raised, expectant.

"She told me to get far away from you."

"That bitch. I loved her! Protected her, coveted her, as I did you, Sunshine. You made the storm clouds go away."

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Bullshit. I saw the way he dismissed Laney, silenced her, took her for granted. He shouldn't even get this right to defend himself. "She said you trapped her into marriage." Her eyes reddened with unshed tears. "With me."

"Don't pretend to know, Sunshine. She wanted to marry me. She loved me."

"I wasn't a product of love." Her cheeks blazed. In shame, I realised.

"Of course, you were, Sunshine. Til death do us part, she promised."

"You forced her. She told me."

"I did no such thing," Spit collected around the seam of his mouth, the white foam slowly dripping down his chin. "She never listened to me. Always feeling sorry for herself with something. You made her happy."

Laney flipped out an army knife, and I swore I fell in love again. "Do you even miss her?"

"Don't ask me silly questions, girl."

A tear slipped down Laney's cheek, her hands shaking. I had to look away.

Then, his glaring eyes found mine. "Aren't you going to apologise? You made her into a bumbling mess!"

I rolled my eyes at the accusation. "Me? You did this."

“I certainly did not.”

Laney groaned loudly. “Stop it, Father!” She said, swinging the knife without care. “Tell me why you really did it. And don’t talk around it.”

“Styria and I met in college.” He smiled. “Galen and I were both the oldest children of our bridged family. Destined to be friends, but in practice we were constantly competing. First it was just banter, jabs and light punches, but soon enough the punches rolled into full-on fist fights. He’d had a girlfriend before, he went out drinking in the park with the older kids, he had it all. He threw it in my face and isolated me. Until your mother came along, she struggled with battles of the mind, while I threw the punches, we understood each other.

“Then one day, I was walking to her house after college. Smug and holding flowers. I was going to ask her to be my girlfriend. But when I turned the corner on her street, a car idled in front of her house. I recognised the number plate immediately. The driver door opened, and Galen walked to open the passenger door. Out walks, Styria, blushing.

“He didn’t look but he knew I was watching. I came to her house everyday like clockwork. I was running late because I stopped to buy flowers from the village shop. Then, he kissed her. Styria’s mother, Mrs Braxton, stood at the door, admiring. It wasn’t fair.”

“Father,” Laney sighed softly. “The fire?”

He ignored her. “I stabbed him. As he fell, I stepped on his knee, I heard the crack of joints. He didn’t fight me, just laughed on the ground. Styria said it was a mistake, she kept saying she was sorry. There was a glint in her eyes, though. Fear. I ran home.”

“Due to his injury, Galen had to sleep in the library downstairs. I heard my mother say that to my father. I was grounded. When night fell, I stole some petrol and matches and marched to the Karstein mansion. Books are great fuel. She promised to keep the secret. I had to marry her.”

“All of this for petty drama. You’re unbelievable”

“I did this for you!” He yelled.

“You did this for yourself!” She sighed, and produced a hair pin from her pocket, the tip of it lethal. “I was just too dumb to realise. All this time you only wanted to protect yourself.”

“I won, Laney. I got her, and I got you. I won’t apologise for that. I won!”

But she wasn’t listening. “You weren’t building an army to defend the Ravencroft Estate, you were building an entourage, a buffer to protect your own back. Cannon fodder. You weren’t worried Grandfather’s death was a targeted attack, you were worried you were next.”

Richard’s face was unreadable, his smug expression masking his true feelings.

“Grandfather moved away because he was ashamed of you! He was murdered because of you!” His face fell as Laney lifted the hair pin and held it just over his open wound. “He was murdered Father, and all you cared about was yourself!” She shook her head, taking out a blade from her ankle and turning it sideways. “You didn’t win. No, you failed. I’m ashamed to be related to you.”

“You were made in the image of me!”

“Well, I prefer the image of my mother.” In one fell swoop, she used the side of her



blade like a hammer and banged the hairpin into his wound. The scream he let out rumbled through the cold walls. “A Braxton. Not a Ravencroft.”

“Stab me, Laney.” Blood poured from the wound anew. “Don’t make me hear those words.”

She raised the knife to his chest, wavering. “You disgust me.”

“Just kill me, Laney.”

I came up behind her, gun gripped tightly at my side. “You don’t have to do this,” I said softly in her ear. A brutal death weighed on your conscience, I didn’t want that for her. She’d been through enough.

“Do it for me.” Her father said as blood appeared to pool in his mouth. Her lips downturned at the sight. “I have nothing to live for anyway.”

“Not even me?” She replied, gutted.

He looked at me and then her, perusing her up and down in disgust. “You’ve been tainted.”

I hoped to provide her some privacy by moving to stand in the corner of the room, but my eyes were peeled to see this man suffer.

All of a sudden, my gun was snatched from my hand and a cracking whack rang through the air. Laney had hit him across the face with my gun. Then stabbed in the heart, right in the hole of his shirt where the bullet had entered.

He yelped a haggard cry for help, but his eyes were dead. No one was coming to help him. Least of all his daughter, who dragged the embedded knife downward to pierce his lungs. He gargled some blood before going limp.

Laney collapsed, spent beside him, and when she looked up at me, her cheeks were dry.

?

“I regret every birthday,” she uncovered the tattoo on her arm. We sat in the hallway outside the cell, Laney didn’t want to go far. “I hid in my room to not make him more pitiful. Every time I shied away from talking about Mother, I should’ve thrown it in his face.”

I let her speak.

“You know, I never got to meet my grandparents on my mother’s side, Father told me they didn’t want anything to do with me. I guess I now know why.”

“You could reach out to them,” I grabbed her hand, “You still have a family.”

A bittersweet smile played on her lips. “I don’t know how I woul—”

Terrence came bounding round the corner. “Go in there! What is taking so long?”

I stood. “It’s done.”

He stopped in front of us. “And you’re sitting here commiserating?”

“Celebrating,” Laney deadpanned.

“Oh really?”

I nodded, eyebrows lifted at her response. “That bad, huh?” I told her.

She nodded with me. “I recently discovered.”

“I’ll tell Daddy you killed him. He’s itching for an update.”

“I didn’t...actually.” I looked him in the eye, then tilted my head. “She did.”

The shock on his face was golden, but too quickly, it turned into a graver expression.

“Parricide?” He asked.

“Thought maybe it’ll earn her some brownie points.” Laney shrugged, but it did nothing to soothe the panicked expression on Terrence’s face.

“I-I...don’t know about that, Kil, are you sure about this?” He said.

I looked toward Laney. “It’s a risk.”

“I’m not here to hurt you.” Laney said. “Promise.”

Terrence knelt down before her. “It’s not that simple, sweetheart. You carry his name.”

“I don’t want it. I’ll prove it.”

“I’ll tell him that.”

“I’m not a threat,” she said, defiant.

He stood again and as he walked off said. “We’ll be the judge of that.”

A pregnant pause elapsed. I wasn’t sure what to say. All I knew was that she couldn’t stay. I still failed and Laney was still a Ravencroft. Both indelible truths. Daddy wasn’t going to forgive this so easily.

As if sensing my thoughts, she scooted closer to me, our hips touching. “You know, we can make this work right?”

I released the deep breath I was holding. “The trouble isn’t over. Sorren will be waiting around every corner you walk around when he discovers you’re back. Not to mention my father—”

“I don’t care anymore. I’m going against everything adverse to my nature. Kenn—Uh Kilina, I forgive you. I’ve lost my entire family but I’m here. For you. Is love not enough? Does love have to have pain for you to want it, to allow yourself to feel it?”

“Love hasn’t got anything to do with it. It’s not you, it’s m—”

“Shut the fuck up, right now.”

“Princess.” I sighed.

“No!” She yelled. “No, you don’t get to do this. I sacrificed everything for you, my home, my stability, my health. All the while, you were winning. You won, Kilina, huh? Isn’t that good enough? Can’t I be your victory prize?”

“You don’t know me, Laney. You think you do, but I’m not Kenna. I am not looking for a reward. I was only the first thing that came along. There will be others.” My blood ran cold at my own words. Others? You think I’d let them get close. But I had to say it, because she had to hear it. “Don’t be with me just because you don’t know anything else. I deserve to be chosen.”

“I chose you in the hallways of St. James’s, don’t delude yourself into thinking you forced me. I chose this too. I am not my father.” She choked. “I came back to my former home that was besieged by my worst enemy. Don’t talk to me about choice. The weak revenge. The strong forgive. That’s what Einstein said. You’ve had your revenge, very clearly, but don’t you also want to be strong?”

“What kind of literary bullshit is that Laney please. I can’t stand—”

She put her foot down. “I forgive you. Every bit of it.”

“You don’t truly believe that. You’re just latching on to me. My family is waiting for me. I’ve got to report back on this.” I went toward the door, and she slammed it shut before I could leave it.

“I love you.” She laid the words out, stripped bare. I didn’t doubt they were honest, but I wasn’t sure I could accept it. Laney was touch starved to the point where any touch was conceived as a loving one. It wasn’t the reality of life though. Her insecurity around her inexperience was something she can’t fix with me here. I was too familiar.

I gave her a weak smile. “Your mother would be proud of you.”

“She would. I opened the box. She told me to choose love, Kilina. In that box was a letter. It was from her before she passed.” She had more hope in her eyes than I had in my entire life, if only I could let her in.

“Yeah? Well, we found footage of your father starting the fire, burning my grandparents and uncle to death. We aren’t cut from the same cloth. It’ll never happen.” I sighed. “You’re a Ravencroft, Laney. I’m a Karstein. Your father destroyed this. Destroyed us before we were even born.”

“I’m not my father!” She yelled. “Can’t we get rid of some of this animosity?”

“No.”

“So, I was right?”

“No one’s wrong.”

“We are incompatible.”

She dropped her shoulders, defeated, I thought at first, but then she pushed them back in a show of confidence. “I don’t think so. This is my home. I’m staying.”

I punched a fist into the wall beside her head. “Can’t you see, Laney? I’m using you. I needed you to ring a confession from your father. I needed you to get close so that I could stay in this house. It wasn’t real. You’re a strategy.”

It didn’t hurt her like I thought it would.

It emboldened her.

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“I am not.” She said as she stood, “Come back to me when you are done lying to yourself.”

### Chapter 31

#### LANEY

Somehow, I never expected to be the one to fight for love. Somewhere between the pages, my stories of romantic tragedy, I’d lost my agency. This love was mine, we didn’t have to end up drinking poison or stabbing ourselves in the heart. Neither of us need to go up in flames.

Neenan returned to the estate two days after I did. As soon as he was in eyesight, I ran to him, apologised and confessed the sins of my father. We sat at breakfast in the mess hall, weary eyes stuck on our backs.

“When are they going to see us as harmless?”

“We’re still the enemy, that mindset doesn’t change overnight.”

“But what are they waiting for?”

“Revenge, maybe. They’d know a thing or two about it to be cautious about it.”

“Well, I’m choosing to be here, not under any deception.”

“It’s not that easy. You’re going to need to prove that you’re loyal to the Karsteins,



not just disloyal to your family name.”

I groaned.

“Not just loyalty to their daughter, either.”

“Love is hard.” To desire and be desired was a dream I’d only known in books and films, now I was in the thick of it.

“Wow, what awful problems to have.”

“Yeah, because losing my family to the girl I like is easy.”

“Oh.” He shuffled toward me. “Shit. That’s not what I meant, I’m sorry.”

A shadow cast over the table. There was someone behind me.

“You can’t be in here.”

“I surrendered, I can.” I told one of Kilina’s brothers, I can’t remember which. He had long hair that stuck out in numerous directions and piercing brown eyes identical to his sister’s. His posture was relaxed, though his arms were folded and his shoulders rigidly still.

Neenan stood in a similar stance, but he was across the long dining room table from me. If he wanted to reach me quickly, he’d have to climb over it.

“We don’t like your kind here.”

I scoffed. “My kind? I’m not infectious.”

“You’re a poison that is being rejected by the body, i.e. me.”

“Excuse me, you deal in narcotics, not me.”

I stood, facing him, our chests almost touching, though he didn’t seem fazed by the proximity. This man was in extreme control of his body. The tough edges of his shoulder blades, and hard pointiness of his elbow could be lethal when wielded, I knew because an elbow from his folded arms dug into my stomach. It hurt, but I wasn’t going to let him know that, no, instead I returned his stare.

“There’s a target on your back, Laney-Painey.”

Placing my foot on the chair I had just vacated, I reached for the knives stuffed in my sock.

“Laney...” A seductively thick voice drawled from behind me, firm but sweet, and completely out of nowhere, but I recognised the voice in an instant. “No.”

I didn’t move. I didn’t trust a singular movement on this man, he could overpower me in a second through brute force alone, I needed a precaution and I’ll be damned if Kilina prevented me from using them. Though I wasn’t great at offence, I was a master in defence. I was tired of people thinking otherwise. Just try me.

“No,” I said, simply.

“Malachi, just drop this, please.”

“Kil, why are you okay with having an enemy in our midst?” He said, his gaze never wavering. “And then I found out, it wasn’t even you who killed Richard Ravencroft. We need to kill your weakness.”

All she did was sigh and grabbed the hand I had at my ankle and placed it on my bent knee. “Stop being annoying and find somebody else to taunt. This isn’t happening.”

“What happened to you, Kilina? You’re soft.”

“No.” She said, sitting down at the table. “I’m not. I just pick my battles, and this isn’t one of them. Do something useful, the artillery van arrived a couple minutes ago, transfer that inventory.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that she doesn’t belong here.”

“We can choose to be better leaders,” Kilina slammed her hand on the table as cutlery bounced to the floor. “And if that’s with the heart—”

The heavy footfalls of boots drew our attention away.

Then, Terrence joined this sibling reunion. He stood to the side, not looking remotely interested in the stand-off that was occurring in front of him and announced in his usual baritone manner. “I need your help with something.”

“Sure,” Kilina said, standing.

“I didn’t mean you.”

I looked up at him, surprised, pointing a finger to my chest. “Uhh...what for?”

“We’d benefit from your expertise on a matter concerning security.”

With a firm nod, I followed him out the door, wiggling my eyebrows inquisitively at Kilina. “I can lend a hand.”

A moment before I rounded the corner, I remembered. “Kilina, meet me at the firepit at sundown. Yeah?” From the corner of my eye, I could see the slight nod she provided.

Then, I left following Terrence down the shadowed corridors of the estate that I used to call home. It was no different to before, yet it carried with it a new air, as if the oxygen I breathed was suddenly purer and the drafts that came in through the old windows were more fresh than haunting. It had a new life.

Without warning, Terrence stopped and produced a small white object from his pocket. “It was my mission to track your grandfather.” He confessed as he shifted his weight from one leg to the other. It didn’t occur to me that he was a particularly affectionate man, so his sympathy surprised me. He lowered his voice. “When I got up there, I patrolled him and learned his routine, his habits, his desires. It surprised me how open and free he was. I thought he was the merciless leader, I had been taught to believe he was. But he was kind. The locals all talked about him fondly.”

My hands began to shake. These last couple weeks have been a stressful distraction from my greatest loss, I didn’t want to face it in front of Kilina’s brother. But the man he described was exactly the man I knew. I missed him.

“I surveilled him for a couple days as he ran his errands until one day he stopped. Completely out of the blue. So, when I approached his home, I thought he might have fallen or something, but what I found was much worse.” He gulped between sentences, and dread swirled in my stomach. “He must’ve known we were coming because...uhh...because when I entered his front door, I saw redness sprayed across his living room wall in a perfect circle. The bullet had went straight through his skull.”

Tears sprung to my eyes, and I had to clutch on to the wall for support. I wasn’t sure I could hear this, not in any amount of detail, it was brutal. I wished he would stop, but I couldn’t say a word.

“He was slumped on the floor.” I looked up at Terrence and noticed the sheen in his eyes too. “And this,” he extended his shaking hand. “This was beside him. I meant to destroy it but...”

“He killed himself.” I whispered, interrupting.

“I haven’t read it. I made myself believe he didn’t deserve his voice being heard. That he couldn’t beg for mercy after what he had done. But after learning about him from the community around him. I just couldn’t hate him. I think you should have it.” He waved the thing around as if it burned him.

“He didn’t know about the fire until after.” I said, but in the back of my head, I knew that my explanation didn’t matter. It was one thing to deliver the final blow to a man you believed deserved it, but it was a struggle to witness the death of someone you believe didn’t. This man was haunted. His gaunt expression now, despite the unshed tears, proved it to me. He wasn’t a villain.

“I know,” he replied. “I’m sorry.”

We exchanged deep breaths where we stood in the cold shadows of the manor. My office, or what had been my office, was only a stone throw away from here. This man prompted the suicide of my grandfather, yet I couldn't hate him like I should. He was a good man associated with a family name that had been cursed by his son. I was a victim of our family name as much as him.

It's with that thought that I begin to grieve Grandfather. For too long, I had put my process of his grief on the backburner, but with the knowledge that he died in a resolute way, kneecaps the injustice of his death.

"I needed to tell you that, Laney." Terrence said. "I couldn't live with myself if you went on thinking his life was robbed."

He sacrificed himself. If to spare himself from the pain of his son's betrayal or to avoid a confrontation with the family his name ruined, we will never know. But with that mystery solved, I might finally close the chapter on his book while still keeping it on the shelf. Some part of me would never get over the brutality of it.

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Even if it was understandable, it was unnecessary. I would grieve that as much as him.

As I looked at the floor in contemplation, a black handkerchief entered my field of vision, blocking the view of my shoes. “Thank you,” I replied. It was kind.

I dried my eyes before handing it back to him. What now? I seemed to ask with the tilt of my head. Was this all he dragged me out here to say?

“Well,” Terrence looked uncertain. “My mother is actually waiting for you.”

I chuckled an anxious laugh, eyes wide. He wanted me to see her, “Looking like this!”

He worried his lip between his teeth.

“Okay.” This was how I was going to be formally introduced to Kilina’s mother. Alright. Nodding repeatedly, I amped myself up. “Do I look alright?” I asked, patting my hair down.

“Yes,” he sounded assured, but something told me he was just being nice.

No pressure. I thought. “Lead the way.”

Terrence spun on his heel and took me to the security office. Didn’t he know he could’ve just told me it was my office?

When he opened the door for me, I was flooded with all the feelings that overcame me in this room. Sweet memories, I hummed to myself. Especially in that chair, I glared at it, and suddenly, my flustered mood amplified, but then it shifted and rotated to reveal Kilina's mother. She looked identical to her picture that was among Grandfather's paintings. It drew me to her, the same way it had drawn me to her daughter.

"Ah, Laney. Good that you came." Her tone of voice said the opposite, a slight snarl graced her face. I hoped it wasn't at my surely blotchy red cheeks. If it was, she didn't mention it, just invited me to sit and dismissed Terrence. His absence was felt as the closed door bathed us in the darkness of the room.

"I don't want to be in bed with the enemy, pardon the pun, so make yourself useful." She said. "Tell me about the Novelli dynasty, as you know, we crippled them by eradicating their matriarch, but it was only meant to be a temporary measure. How much of a threat are they?"

It was hard to find the right thing to say at first. My previous life had kept me isolated from the level of threat the syndicate faced at once. I'd been taught to focus on security, not the danger involved. The Novelli dynasty was part of the security protocol.

"They were considered backup. They don't deal in the operations arena of the Ravencroft's dealings but assisted major operations in concerns of security. As I'm sure you are aware, they were meant to provide protection during my grandfather's funeral. It's that type of thing."

"What are the chances of escalating tension with the dissolution of the Ravencroft Estate? Would they plan for revenge?"

"Well, my grandfather wanted a similar deal with them as they once had with you.



Loyalty at its core. I was almost married to solidify that alliance.”

“Almost?” She interrupted.

“It was annulled on the wedding night.”

“Is that right?”

I nodded, unsure where she was taking this.

“And they didn’t wish for restitution?”

“No...”

“They have mobilised. As we speak, Aldo Novelli is retracting operations from the southern coast and bringing them into the city. How do you suppose their plan would go from there?”

“Change in leadership usually comes with a grace period for transitioning.”

“We don’t have that time.”

“Exactly.” I input my log in details to the server and bring up a localised map of the locations and establishments the Ravencroft Estate had dealings with. “If you haven’t negotiated a new contract with these businesses, this is what they’re heading for. You’re vulnerable. Killing Flavia Novelli fractured the leadership, that’ll slow them down, but they won’t give up the opportunity for easy bait. Easy cash in the Ravencroft Estate’s absence.”

“For growth?”

“Potentially. They are smart businessmen, they won’t target you. Not immediately.”

“So, they’re coming?”

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Almost certainly. I wanted to say. They were lucky they had Aldo in their keeps right now. “I can be a liaison for them. They’ll listen to me. We have a rapport. You don’t.”

“Kilina doesn’t.” No, Logan was probably still crying about being bested by a girl. “They don’t know us.”

“They do. They know Kilina was a Karstein. They know she is responsible for Flavia’s death.”

“How ever could that be possible?”

“Aldo Novelli came to us before the funeral, warning my father and I to beware of an assassin within our midst. At the funeral, Aldo was in attendance, and Kilina was playing the dutiful guard.” I held up two fingers and connected them in the air.

“Hmmm, you might be an asset after all.”

“I’ve been trained in security and defence strategy and served as head of security for the estate.”

“My daughter told me you ran the training too?”

She talks about me? “Some of it. Yeah.”

“Interesting.”

“Are you...are you looking to hire someone?”

“Malachi told me you intend to earn your keep. I want to give you that chance.”

“Thank you!” I said too loudly. “But...Why are you helping me?” My voice wavered.

“Kilina’s instincts are rarely wrong, I doubted her, and I want to make it right.” Her hair fell in her face. A glossy darkness like her daughter’s, but pin straight. “But let me make one thing clear, I do this for her foremost. Not you.”

“Understood.” I nodded, and despite the tension and grief that would surely hit later, I dared to show a fraction of a smile.

?

I had the fire already lit when she arrived. It was a warm night for the season, but the flames offered a comforting warmth, like a blanket. I heard her before I saw her.

“I wasn’t sure you’d show.” I said without looking up.

Dead leaves crunched under her feet as she shifted her weight from leg to leg. And a crackle of something else. “I brought a consolation gift.”

In her hand was a bag of marshmallows.

“Where did you find these?” Excitement exuding from my voice. It had been days since I tasted something sweet.

“There’s a secret stash in Forrester’s office.”

I laughed. Neenan was right. “Who would’ve thought?”

“Life is full of surprises.” She sat beside me, the orange of the flames reflecting in the amber of her dark eyes. It drew me in. “I’m sorry, Laney.”

Reaching behind me, I pulled a blanket from the bag I’d brought out here. A chill ran from head to toe, there was a strong breeze. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not. All this change,” She took a deep inhale, and on the exhale out breathed, “You didn’t deserve the drama.”

“Life is full of surprises.”

“But it shouldn’t be full of loss. Once I heard your story, I wanted to slow the plan, I swear. I’m sorry I didn’t warn you.”

“You did.”

She tilted her head to the side, I wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, cocooning us both.

“Beware of the assassin.”

“Ahh.”

“Yes. You were warning me, even then. You were coming.”

She shook her head. “I was taunting you, Laney. Your family had massacred my family with that fire, and as it turned out Richard started it. He was the assassin. It wasn’t fair. I just didn’t know....” She stopped.

“Know what?”

“That I’d fall for you.” There was doubt on her face, a mixture of pained sorrow and regret, as if she were anticipating a rejection. I wouldn’t give it to her.

My father taught me to push people away, he had me thinking that this family was all that I needed and anything other was to be feared. All it really did was make me clutch onto people, sometimes, the wrong people. He doubted my strength to compete with the outside world. But Kenna never did. And Kilina respected it. In fact, she wanted me to go into the world and find my place. No one had wished that for me before.

“Do you think that makes you weak?” I asked.

She contemplated this for a moment. “No,” she said, eventually, staring into space. “So, what did you want to do out here?”

I ignored her subject change. “Well,” I started, “I don’t have a trampoline. The store wouldn’t ship it in time...nor did I have the money. But I brought blankets, wine, and made the fire for warmth.”

The dots hadn’t connected in her mind. “To do...?”

I stood and grabbed the blanket off her, eliciting a fast shiver across her skin. She was so pretty. I’d warm her up soon. Moving the chairs on the opposite side of the firepit, I revealed a picnic set up.

The uncertain look on her face didn’t resolve as I had thought.

“Stargazing.” I stated. I swore I saw her eyes glaze over, but she blinked it away too fast for me to mention it. My heart warmed regardless, and not because of the fire or blankets.

She walked over slowly, an apprehension that I wanted to believe was surprise and not doubt. “You?” She asked.

I nodded.

“You did this?”

“It’s a token. To make you feel at home.” I shrugged as I sat on the blanket I’d laid out. “Something familiar.”

Her knees buckled as she fell forward onto the blanket and right on top of me. The pressure on my chest felt like I was about to lose all my breath, but for her, it would’ve been worth it. Thankfully, she soon propped her hands up on either side of my body. My cheeks blushed at the position.

She raised an eyebrow. “Remind you of something?”

I stiffly shook my head. “Nope. Just sat too close to the fire, you know how it is.”

She scrunched her nose in the most un-Kilina way. “Sure.” Adorable.

Struck with a burst of confidence, I lifted my face and placed a hard kiss on her lips. My mouth hot on her skin as my breath escalated and my neck began to strain.

She didn’t kiss me back. Her eyes were open.

I laid back down in a wash of shame, my blushed burned my cheeks. “Sorry.”

She said nothing.

I tried to move my hips to get out from under her, but it was like she was frozen. A blankness across her features. I extended my head to kiss her again and she pulled away, freeing me from her weight.

Dear God, please let me just sink through this blanket and be six feet under.

To my surprise, she didn’t make a move to leave. “Did you bring skewers?”

It took a moment to realise what she was referring to as my back grew cold from the damp ground. Marshmallows. I didn’t have the effort to speak so I just pointed toward the bag that served as a makeshift picnic basket.



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“I’ll make you one,” she said as she sat beside the fire. “Do you like yours crispy or just lightly toasted?”

“Crispy?” I forced out a laugh. “No, I don’t want mine crispy.”

“What? There’s nothing wrong with a little crunch.”

“So burnt?” I came to sit on the opposite side of the fire, dragging a chair close.

“No!” She defended. “Just that the outer layer of sugar is crystallised and then the inside is so gooey and soft.”

I extended a hand toward her. “I think I’ll make my own,” I said, waving my fingers so that she’d pass me a skewer and marshmallow.

“Pink or white?”

“Pink.”

Kilina tutted at a low volume. “Naturally.”

“Hey, they’re good!”

We shared a smile and held our skewers over the burning wood. The hissing of the fire as it let out pockets of remaining air filled the quietness between us. It wasn’t necessarily awkward, but neither was it calm. A tension brewed, and I wished to undercut it in any way. “Would you like wine?”

“No, Laney.” Her tone contemplative. “Gotta keep a clear head around you.”

It was a joke, I thought, but it wasn’t funny. All I could say in response was, “Okay,” as I poured myself a glass. I took a big gulp when I sat back down.

Then, she looked at me, sighed and opened her mouth repeatedly. “Look—”

“Your marshmallow is sizzling!”

“No, Laney, could I just say—”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

“Really, your marshmallow is about to drop, Kenna.”

The name made her grimace. “Laney, I just—”

“It wasn’t a rejection!” Then, it fell off the skewer.

My eyelids closed. “I told you, it’s okay.”

“It’s not, though. I just don’t want to continue hurting you with my decisions. Your home, your job, your father...”

“I killed my father. You are not responsible for that.”

“I am. Or my family is. Seeing you hurt hurts me. And I wish I wasn’t so cold toward you when I came or used sex as a weapon, you didn’t deserve it.”

“I didn’t.”

“I’m glad—”

“But you don’t get to justify your guilt by hurting me more. I made a choice. Out of all the people that I thought doubted my choices, I never thought it would be you.”

“I trust you.” She bit her lip. “I do. But knowing I’m the reason for so much of your trauma. I can’t stand it.”

One side of my mouth ticked up. “You finally grew a heart.”

“I guess, I did.”

“I’ve told you before, I forgive you. And I’m already working with your family to rebuild. Forget the names, do you love me?”

She stood with sudden anger. “It’s not about that!”

“It can be.”

“But my family...”

“We can work it out.”

Her shoulders dropped, it was a rarity when that happened. Usually, her relaxed but rigid stance showed her confidence. I am nothing but glad that she was able to show me her vulnerable side.

“Thank you, princess.” Walking around the fire, she sat beside me and hugged me, her hair in my face. It kinda smelled smoky. I pulled away quickly and checked the fire, grabbing at my stick.

“Aw man, my marshmallow is basically melting off the stick.”

Kilina came up behind, took the skewer from my hand and ate the marshmallow in one bite. “Perfect for me.”

Later that night, we laid side by side on the blanket and gazed up at the stars for

hours. When I got cold, she dragged a blanket over my body, securing it with her arm around my waist. She pointed out the constellations and visible planets. This was a view that I neglected, it made me feel smaller in my isolation at the realisation of the vastness of the universe.

But that feeling of loneliness was replaced.

We fell asleep somewhere between three or four in the morning after she sang a soft melody. I wasn't sure, I didn't look at my phone once. I just cherished the feeling of having someone beside me.

## Chapter 32

### KILINA

Burned bridges only stopped people too afraid to swim. I was ready to risk drowning. However, that was a simple thing to say in your head, but to my dad, it didn't go down a treat. The exchange of frustrated pleas and unconvinced yells made me feel like a teenager again.

“What happened to your pride in the family name? You're not going to fight for us? Against them.”

“I am.” I was so certain of it I could scream. “I fight for us, always, but I finally found something to fight for. For me.”

“You gallivant the Ravencroft girl around the place. She has the enemy name, Kil. You can't love Ravencroft. Your mama might be okay with it, but I am not!”

“Too late.” I shrugged, tears welling in my eyes. “I will fight for her without names. Without tokens of resentment. But for the girl that I love.”

“Love?” Daddy spat. “This is just infatuation. This isn’t love. You barely know her, she doesn’t know you.”

“It is and she does. Daddy, don’t pretend you don’t know the feeling.”

“It’s because I know the feeling that I tell you, don’t do this.”

“Accept it, Daddy. She’s part of me.”

He sighed, deeply. My tears now free flowing as my breath came out stunted and haggard. His expression troubled between uncertain outrage and outright defeat, and I didn’t know which one I’d prefer.

And I certainly hadn’t thought sympathy was what he’d land on. “If that’s all true, then, why did you let her go?”

“For the cause. For our name. I came here to tell you I was wrong. You are wrong. I’m glad she came back because look at this.” I lifted my arms up. “All that you’ve got. Is any of it worth it without the people you love?”

He shut his eyes, but I knew I had him.

“I need to meet her before I trust her. Officially.”

I nodded. “Of course, daddy.”

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“Give her our name, Kilina, it’s the only way.”

I winked. “As long as you pay for the ring.”

He clutched his heart in mock hurt.

“Oh, and,” I smiled. “She has expensive taste.”

“Go get her.”

“Thank you.” I shouted over my shoulder as I ran out the door.

“Get out of my sight.” His tone light.

Before I properly left the room, I turned around and ran back to him giving him a quick hug. Most of the time he was a brooding menace, but sometimes, very sometimes, he could see me for who I was. His tutelage was tough, and his mantra of ‘no attachments’ was drilled into my head so hard that I missed the message at its core.

Protect your own.

If Laney were to be mine, she wouldn’t be an attachment, she would be a part of me. It would be my mission to protect her until we share our last breath.

“Right now, Kil.” Dad pulled me from my thoughts.

“Okay.”

?

Neenan said he'd dropped her off here, but between the stone markers and incoming mist, I didn't see her. I jumped out of the car and pursued the graveyard of the little church. Nestled in the middle of the woods, it was overrun by thick vines obscuring the names on the gravestones and providing relative anonymity to those who rest here. The rhythmic call of birds soothed the gloomy atmosphere of the darkening clouds.

On one such gravestone only the town name could be read, but I knew immediately who lay there. I tore the vines from the crumbling stone.

Born on 10th November 1939 in Bilham, England.

Died on 24th July 1997 in Great Tenor, England.

The date of the massacre. A breath caught in my throat as I raised my shaking hand to the name written above those numbers.

Katarina Karstein. I'm sorry, I never got to meet you.

Next to my grandmother's resting place was a gravestone that had been entirely defaced. Galen. I sat down between the graves, just staring at them. I was fortunate to always have an ensemble of family around me, our secrecy thickening the blood that ran through our veins, joining us. Yet, there were two empty chairs at our dinner table every night.

Underneath both, in small, engraved letters, were two letters. E and R. I stared at it, but no answers sprung to mind as to what these stood for. It would be easy to posit



that it's the manufacturing company but there was something embellished about it. A type of attention to detail that was significant, but understated, as if it were a code not meant to be deciphered.

The crack of a branch startled me, and the sound of raven calls ceased.

"You know what those letters stand for?" Laney. Thank fuck.

I looked up at her, lost.

She took a seat beside me. I didn't have to ask her to explain as she pointed at each letter. "Edward. Ravencroft."

I furrowed my eyebrows. Why would he ever give a dignified death to his enemy?

"My grandfather never believed in the injustice of it all. He didn't wish for the union to collapse, if he knew you survived, he would've wished for a reunion."

I caved in on myself, trying to make myself as small as possible. We killed a man who wanted me to live. I had to live with that now, and before I never would've thought to regret my actions, no matter how ruthless.

"You didn't kill him," she said softly.

"I know, but my bro—"

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“He didn’t either.” No, that’s not possible. I thought loudly, but all Laney did was give me a slow nod. “He told me. Terrence found his body with a note.”

If I thought that piece of information would soothe my guilty conscience, I was sorely mistaken. But like Laney always did, she knew what I was thinking.

“He was a better man than most, he moved his leadership up north because he couldn’t stand to be surrounded by your tragedy. It’s him I endeavour to be. Not my father, I hope you know.”

Laying my head on my bent knees, I reflect.

“It’s not your fault.” Laney told me. My heart constricted, it should be me comforting her, not the reverse.

“Your father’s failure isn’t yours either.”

She gave me a sad kind of smile, and it was like she was looking right through me, imbuing me with a comforting understanding I’d never experienced before as she said the words I couldn’t. “Thank you.”

“What are you doing here anyway? Alone?”

She blinked. “I’m not alone.”

“What are you doing here without another breathing person? And I don’t mean me.” I wished for her honesty rather than be confronted with my own, she was far more

articulate in her feelings.

“I missed them,” she said with a shrug, grabbing a stick and making swirling patterns in the dirt. “And the life I had. I’ve been thinking, would you hate it if I made a grave for my father?”

I just shook my head. Even those that didn’t deserve it were remembered. There was always a place for them. If not to grieve, then to learn.

“It’ll just be some flowers. No stone or anything.”

“You don’t need my permission.”

She pressed her lips together and left to go to the back of the church. There, lines of wilting poppies and wild daisies hugged the exterior stone and formed a kind of protective bridge between the wildness of the forest and the serenity of the church. Though, Laney didn’t seem to think so as she yanked flowers, stem and all, out the ground, collecting them in her hand in a makeshift bouquet. It almost made me laugh.

I looked on, transfixed.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m going to replant them.”

“I know you are.” I covered my mouth with my hand. “Where were you thinking?”

She pointed to the furthestmost corner of the graveyard, beyond the fallen tree branch that cut the yard in half. “He’ll be safest there.”

When we brought the flowers to that corner and Laney arranged them as she wished in the patch of dirt we'd cleared, we paused, at a loss of what to do next. It wasn't right to sing a song of Kumbaya, but neither did he warrant the moment of silence we were giving him right now. I looked at her for what to do next, it was her choice in the end.

What she did surprised me. On a sharp turn, she pressed her boot print into the dirt and walked away, head held high. I was impressed and followed her away from the graveyard to the road beside it.

"I appreciate your help here, but why did you come?"

Hmmm, yes, my big confession. I'd lost the momentum of my father's encouragement, now weighed down by the grief of both of our families' actions.

"You know when I said your mother would be proud of the person you became," She nodded, leaning in close. "I think your grandfather would be too. I'm sorry for your loss."

"I'm sorry for yours," she said more curt than I'd hoped. It was a compliment after all. "What are you really doing here?"

"Just wanted to see you."

"You've been arguing with me for days."

"Well, not anymore." I flicked my tongue at her in a move I hoped was at least slightly seductive. A spit of rain fell instead, eliciting a very unsexy shiver.

“So, you came here to not argue with me?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Yes...”

“Great, so should we just sit here and stare at each other?”

“Yes...” I smiled. The rain grew heavier, but I felt warm.

She laughed. “Why are you so bashful all of a sudden? I said it with way more prowess than—”

“Prowess? You were desperate.”

“It was honest.” She tilted her head to the side. Smug. “I would’ve already spat it out.”

“If you already know what I’m going to say, then, I don’t need to say it.” I lifted my chin up, my heart tripling in pace. That can’t be healthy. Oh god.

She lifted herself up onto her tippy toes, our mouths close. “Yes, you do.”

Yes, I do.

Her eyebrows lifted, expectant, falling back on her heels.

“I want to be with you, near you, breathing you in every day. I’m tired of pushing you away, it was never what I wanted.” Somehow, my declaration didn’t feel like a

betrayal of our families, but more in the spirit of honouring them. “I love you.”

“Please, don’t reject me again.” She whispered before she threw herself in my arms so hard I stumbled. My arms wrapped around her as I caught her and kissed her feverishly, both pulling her closer and pushing her back against the car.

Wet clothes suctioned to our bodies.

“Fuck, I’ve missed this.” I lifted her off the ground and she wound her legs tightly around my middle.

“Don’t let me go.”

Shifting her weight to my side, I searched for the car keys in my pocket, never once breaking our connection. “I won’t. I won’t.” I repeated in a prayer.

“Please,” she whimpered as she grinded her core to my hip bone.

“I’ve got you, princess.” After I unlocked the car, I managed to pry the door open, drop her on to the backseat and I poured over her, smothering her body with mine. With a firm hand, I held her chest down and kissed a line from her pubic bone to her neck, my lips dampening from her rain soaked clothing.

Button by button, I undid the jean corset she wore, inch by inch revealing the smooth skin underneath. I stroked my fingers through the light spattering of hair on her lower stomach and massaged the moisture of the rain all over her skin.

I had the top button open before I asked, “Where do you want me first?”

Her back caved as she pushed her breasts into my chest. At the same time, her fingers sharply tugged at the hair at the bottom of my neck, pulling me closer. Enough said.

Laney's skin lifted into goosebumps under the cold trail of my nose that I drew between her breasts and pebbled her nipples. As a kind of reward, I replaced the cold tip of my nose with my hot tongue, leaving wet kisses on her skin. My tongue lapped her nipple in a worshipping manner I hoped would double as an apology for all the time I wasted putting off the inevitable. She was made for me to devour.

She groaned when my teeth skimmed her sensitive areola, and I shoved her trousers halfway down her thighs. My body hovered only slightly above her, but I could feel the heat radiating from her centre. I lowered my hips and lightly rubbed the open top of my jeans roughly against her steaming core. We could write our initials in hearts in the condensation soon enough.

From where her hands were woven into my hair, she lowered them down my back, slipping her cool wet fingers under the top of my trousers and into my underwear. When she had a handful of my arse cheeks, she roughly pulled my hips down into hers. The friction almost made me see stars. God, I'll never tire of this woman.

She tried to grind against my core, building a momentum of movement, but I completely restricted from her body and grabbed her chin, placing a hard kiss on her mouth. My tongue invaded her and collided with hers as she fought for a breath. Still, she relaxed into me, entertaining my kiss with matched energies, until I, too, was desperate for oxygen.

Her heavy heaves of breath made our bodies touch in ebbs and flows. When it became more steady, I dropped my hips, how she wanted it and grinded hard.

The sound of my moan vibrated up my throat and escaped in a stunted breath. "Oh my god," I whimpered.

"Yes," she said back and moved her hands from the back of my trousers to the front, where she found my pussy soaked. "Somebody likes me," She teased.

“Loves.” My arms struggled to hold me up as she used two fingers to rub on my labia, either side of my clit, before closing her fingers and holding my pussy in a firm grip. It was a brutal play. “Somebody loves you.”



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“You.” She confirmed and loosened the grip on my lips, shifting instead to softly squeeze my clit between her fingers.

“You’re killing me.”

She grinned, wickedly and reached up for a hot kiss on my jaw. “Karma.” She cocked her head to the side.

I laughed. The strength in my arms was waning, so I pressed my body on top of hers, trapping her hand between us and I rocked against it. Sharp flashes flit in and out of my vision as the wave of pleasure rose in my core.

She pinched my clit again and I jumped up on my elbows. I could’ve come right there and then, but delayed gratification was now my game.

Circling my arms around her waist, I lifted us into a seated position. Our mouths level, I kissed her with bruising pressure and no less desperation.

I pushed Laney’s back into the door, moving myself between her legs, so that I had a clear sight of her glistening pussy. She groaned at the impact, but as soon as my mouth latched onto her clit, there wasn’t even an air of complaint.

“Go slow,” she said between deep breaths.

I wasn’t sure I could promise it, though, I was yearning to make up for lost time, but her wish was my command. Moving my tongue from her entrance to her clit, I teased her relentlessly with the slowed laps of hot saliva I was spreading over her pussy. She

keened and keeled at each stroke on her clit. I kept a regular tempo and soon, her body convulsed into a mounting orgasm.

“Yes, yes, yes,” She fisted her fingers into my hair and pulled me up to focus only on sucking her clit, and I sucked extra hard. Just for her.

Her body seized in pleasure. A groan stuck in her throat released in slow bursts as her hips bucked repeatedly before her come down.

I kissed her clit, then kissed her on the mouth, showing her how sweet she truly tasted.

“HMMMM,” she hummed, seemingly satisfied, but when she opened her eyes again, they were anything but satiated. She pounced on me, pushing me to lay down on the seats.

Grabbing hands found my breasts and squeezed mercilessly. Her mouth found mine, trading spit as she continued to knead my breasts. The rain had evaporated off our bodies, all that remained was burning skin, itching with the need to be touched.

She laid on top of me with all her weight, one leg between mine, where her thigh rubbed at the outer skin of my pussy. Not close enough. Her hands explored all that she could reach, then she grinded her hips into my lower stomach hard, placing pressure on my bladder.

I groaned loud, thankful that there was only the forest around us. Her breasts hung in my face as she writhed her body into mine, and I bit the outer boob. She flinched but didn't slow her pace for a second.

The world fell away when she peeled her skin from mine and slid a hand between our bodies to fiddle with the sensitive folds of skin around my clit. Her eyes were on

mine as she teased me. My eyelids fluttered, imploring her to give me the touch that I craved.

She revelled in the control, I could tell from her cruel smile. "Patience." She mouthed. Bitch.

I lifted my hips to add pressure to her touch. It was fruitless, she instead, moved her fingers away from my most sensitive spot to my entrance. She penetrated her fingers into me to coat them until they glistened.

"So wet." She said in a new kind of wonder. Taking her fingers out of me, she spread the moisture from my entrance to my clit to my lower stomach.

It was dirty but so hot.

My heart threatened to skip a beat when she brought her soaked fingers to her mouth and licked them clean, before she inserted them into me again. She hit my clit again, but instead of her mouth, she brought them to her entrance. Mixing moisture.

When she sucked her fingers a second time, she brought her mouth to mine intertwining our tongues in a dance and returned her fingers to my clit where she drew light circles on it.

I struggled to breath. She was too hot. Too perfect. Too perfect for me.

Her body aligned with my side, wrapping her legs around one of my legs and spreading my legs further apart. She kept up a steady swirl on my clit and I writhed beneath her. Hair tickled my shoulder from her leaning over me slightly to watch her fingers work my pussy into a sore mess.

The heat from her pussy created a staining wetness on my upper thigh from where

she had my leg wrapped between hers. She made small shifts to rub herself on me as she rubbed me.

Soon, a blistering heat formed in my gut and erupted in shakes and bumps as Laney made me explode in ecstasy. My body constricted as I rode the wave of my orgasm all while she kept up the circular motion on my clit. It rocked the car.

When I could finally breathe normally again, the rocking of the car hadn't ceased. I looked to my side. Laney grinded her forehead into my shoulder as her hips clashed into my thigh until she rode out the eventual climax, I hadn't even noticed in my blissed out state.

I pushed air out of my lungs after a moment and kissed Laney on the top of her head. In all my life, I knew that most people were temporary, so I never wished for more than sex from them. It took too long for me to realise how foolish that thought was. Nothing was better than holding a source of happiness in your arms and knowing that it could stay. She could stay. She's mine.

A moan morphed into a sigh. I felt her body relax into mine. This was perfect and I was so overcome that I could only think of one thing to say. "Thank you."

She laughed. “You don’t need to thank me.”

I was a little dumbfounded. I hadn’t done this before. For most of our relationship, I was confident of my actions. The sex, the tension, I led it. But the emotional stuff? I had no frame of reference. The relationships I’ve been surrounded with were all goal based. I wasn’t even sure if my parents liked each other beyond the empire they built and intended to expand. I hadn’t thought of my life beyond the finish line. All I knew was that I wanted her to be in that post-battle life.

“So, are you my girlfriend?”

“Do you want me to be your girlfriend?”

“I’ve never had a girlfriend before.”

“Me neither!” she said, almost excited. “We can figure it out together.”

I nodded, a bit lost in the gravity of it.

“I’m your girlfriend.” She simply stated as if it were a common fact.

“I’m your girlfriend.” I repeated.

Her eyes darkened. “Yes, mine.”

That’s my line. I’m hers as she is mine.

Rain continued to pitter patter on the skylight of the car, encasing us in a protective bubble that was just our own. She laid in my arms as I drew a finger from Laney's forehead to her nose. Both sans clothing. "This isn't much of a first date, though, huh?"

"Well, no but, there's no one I'd rather do this with. I loved our reunion."

"Union." It was the perfect word for it. "And the orgasms?"

A shy smile crept on her face. "Most definitely. My primary goal. But you know what this means, right?"

I furrowed my eyebrows.

She held her hand up and wriggled her fingers.

With a groan, I smacked her hand down on a laugh. "My dad said that too!"

Hope shone in her eyes. "Really?"

"Yes, yes," I turned my tone serious. "But let's do the girlfriend thing first, alright?"

"Deal."

Epilogue

LANEY

One year later...

I watched the minutes elapse into seconds before final call was announced. It was

another busy Saturday night, and I wanted more than anything to wash off the grime of the day in a steaming hot shower with my girlfriend.

Neenan hoarded a couple people out the door, pinching their drink glasses from out their hands, while Kilina was banging on the bathroom doors getting the last few stragglers to hurry on their way out. I stood behind the bar watching them work.

After the Karstein takeover, Kilina and I wanted to take a step back from family business and try something new, so we opened a relaxed gay cocktail bar called Mircalla in Islington, London. Life in the city was rewarding, although I did sometimes miss the serenity of the forest. That was why the bar had a forest theme with neon pink strobe lighting and planting walls. It brought in an eclectic crowd, and I loved it.

Tonight, we were closing early. We shut on Sundays. Each week we reserved that day for family time. Usually that meant we returned to Great Tenor, or we had a playdate with little Georgia, but tomorrow was an especially important day. I was going to meet my other grandparents.

Before we left for London, Terrence gave me a letter from Grandfather, Edward. He hadn't opened it and thought it might be a suicide note. At the time, he didn't feel the need to keep it, but I was grateful he did, because inside was a letter addressed to me. Among other loving sentiments, he enclosed the contact information of Mother's family that Father always forbade me from meeting.

With Kilina's help, I finally worked up the courage to call the number listed last week. It took them a while to pick up but when they did, I could have cried. In fact, when they heard who was calling, we cried together. I told them a redacted version of my story and they agreed to meet us for Sunday lunch tomorrow.

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But to be ready for that reunion, I needed a good night's sleep and right now, my favourite pillow was marching across the bar floor ushering people to leave, the chains on her belt loops catching the light as they swung. I couldn't wait to get her home.

Neenan came to stand across the bar from me. He pointed to the side of my mouth. "You've got a little something there?"

"What? Where?" I said, dabbing at my face with a napkin. "Have I got it? Is it gone?"

"Nah," he replied, now pointing to his own face as reference, "It's right here. Yup, yeah, that's it, now wipe up all that drool."

I punched him in the arm. "That's not funny!"

He raised his eyebrows. "I only speak the truth." He said into a yawn, chuckling, nonetheless. "Are you nervous?"

More like shit scared. I wanted them to like me. At this point, they were my last remaining relatives, and if I screwed this up in any way, I'd be right back where I started. "Do you think they'd accept me?"

I had blood on my hands. As much as I didn't want that to be associated with me, it was a part of me and my past. I wasn't sure how much they knew about my father or my family, but I hoped whatever they did know wasn't going to skew their impression of me. It's not exactly something that I regret, but neither was it something I was proud of. Killing Father saved him from a painful death, I wanted to



view that as mercy, justice even, and not malice.

“They’ll love you.” He whispered back.

Then, comforting arms wrapped around my middle and pulled me back from the bar. “Hello, baby.” I said as I turned my head to the side, pressing a quick kiss to her temple.

“You ready, princess?” She replied, looping her thumb through one of my belt loops, she tugged me toward the door before I could respond. “Goodnight, Neenan!” she yelled when we reached the door.

“Keep her safe!” I shouted in a fit of giggles as I was dragged backwards. The bar was obviously female. A drag queen in fact. Night, night, Mircalla.

He waved me off, a smile brightening his face. “Will do. Bye!”

When we hit the mean streets of London, it was still wide awake, music roaring from the surrounding bars. I pried her thumb from my trousers and interlaced our fingers together. Walking hand in hand, I revelled in the stomp of her boots and the clink of my mini heel. This was us.

We turned a corner, and a hush befell the street. Away from the ruckus, Kilina guided me up a small staircase to our penthouse apartment. The building was only three storeys high, but it might as well have been on top of the world to me. And as the door unlocked to our home, I could almost forget my previous life.

As we crawled into bed later that night, incessant questions wouldn’t quieten in my mind like how they so often did in her presence. “What if they ask me about Father?” I worried.

“He died, Laney, at your hands or his body. You don’t have to say everything at once.”

“What if I have too much of my father in me and I’m not what they expected?”

“They’ll see your mother’s eyes in you too. You’ll be loved.” That’s what Neenan said.

“How do you know that?” I said, exasperated.

“Because they’ll see what I see.”

“And what is that?”

She tucked a fallen hair behind my ear. “The most kind-hearted girl. Beaming with love.”

“Are you sure?”

Her arms tightened around me. “Promise,” she stated as if it was some universally known fact.

“Pinky promise?”

“My pinky is up.” My heart fluttered, but she just smiled as she leaned closer, mouthing promise at the same time as me before our lips touched. The kiss heated and I moved myself to be on top of her.

“I love you.” I whispered.

“I know, princess,” she said, smug.

I slapped her arm, but I was smiling.

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I would never wonder again if I was alone in this world, because I never was. She was always there. I held her tighter as I fell into a peaceful sleep. Sans migraines.

I was loved.

KILINA

Laney's grandparents welcomed her with open arms like I knew they would. Her mother was as much of a victim as she was. Lillian and Arthur saw that. They made us a delicious Sunday lunch of roasted lamb, Hasselback potatoes and asparagus, but I struggled to swallow a solid bite while the others cleaned their plates.

She squeezed my knee under the table. "Is everything alright?" Laney spoke in a low register.

I nodded but couldn't say anything to her. Instead, I turned to Arthur. "Did you do much of the landscaping yourselves?"

It was a sunny day, so we sat in the conservatory behind their quaint cottage. Their garden was bright and green, a variety of sprigs stuck out of the earth and vines enveloped the side of the house.

"Well, yes." Arthur smiled. "In our retirement, Lillian and I wished to create a slice of nature of our own."

"We picked our first strawberries of the season last week!" Lillian interjected. "I hope you like Eton Mess for pudding!"

“I love Eton Mess!” Laney jumped in.

Lillian and Arthur exchanged a glance. “It was your mother’s favourite too.”

I examined the tablecloth, hoping to give them a private moment, but it just made me more anxious to the point where my knee started bouncing. Laney turned to me concerned, but I placated her by bringing her hand to my mouth, pressing a quick kiss to her fingers.

“Are you done?” Arthur stood with a couple plates in hand already.

“Yes, Sir.” I replied, and picking up Laney’s plate, I stood too. “Let me help you tidy up and get pudding ready.”

“Okay, then.” He gave me a pleasant look and I followed him toward the kitchen to place the plates next to the sink.

I hesitated a moment, trying to form the correct words in the most respectful manner. It was more of an effort than I had anticipated. The rehearsals in my head were futile in the end.

“May I—” I began but stopped. “I know we don’t know each other yet, but I wanted to ask for your blessing?” The words rushed out of me in one breath. I skipped my next one as I waited for his response.

But he didn’t say anything at all. Just pulled me into a warm embrace. He even went so far as to place a brief kiss on top of my head. The affection was a surprise, but I still didn’t have an answer.

I looked at him, expectant.

“Oh! Yes, yes!” He said, finally. It was the opposite to how my parents reacted. They were overjoyed, but it was understated. Only my brothers congratulated me with a clap on the back. “Let me get Lillian, she’d love this. Do you have a ring? Wait, let me get her first.”

“Don’t tell Laney,” I stopped him, “I want it to be a surprise.”

“Of course.” He said. “I’ll bring the bowls to the table, you wait here while I get Lillian.”

When he left, it was barely a moment before Lillian came rushing into the kitchen. “Let me see the ring!”

I pulled a little box out of my pocket. It was the same one I had accidentally sat on a little over a year before. Lillian recognised it immediately.

“Oh,” she whimpered, her eyes glazing. “It’s perfect, darling.”

She dragged a hand down my back, comforting me. It reminded me of my own grandmother, who would never see this day, but it didn’t make me sad. Our love bridged our families toward redemption. If Laney accepted my proposal, we could bury our parents' strife and create something entirely new. Something entirely ours.

In my thoughts, I hadn’t noticed Lillian taking the bowl of Eton Mess to the table, leaving me alone with my thoughts. When I returned to the table I was calm. Laney was already plating up a bowl of the sugary goodness for me.

I made the right choice.

To contrast my calm exterior, Laney’s grandparents were antsy. Only I knew why but I could sense Laney piecing together the shift in the air.

“Bon appétit.” She said, softly, all of a sudden subdued. Spoons clicking in bowls consumed the silence that had fallen on the table. Under the tablecloth, I linked my fingers with hers.

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She squeezed my fingers back. Hard. When we were all done eating, she tugged on my hand and cocked her head violently to the side.

“Excuse us for a second,” I explained to her grandparents, who beamed at me in return.

In an apparent huff, Laney dragged me down the hallway and into a nicely presented bathroom. I got worried when she locked the door.

“What did you say to them in the kitchen?” she asked, her eyebrows deeply furrowed causing wrinkles across her forehead. I soothed them with the stroke of my thumb.

“Nothing bad, promise.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

I move my hand to run my fingers through the ends of her hair. “It’s a secret” I whispered into her ear, smiling. “Patience, princess.”

“Tell me.” She beamed up at me, folding her bottom lip over in the most adorable expression. I couldn’t deny her big pleading eyes. “Please.”

Without a word, I produced the box from my pocket and lifted the lid.

Tears sprang to her eyes in an instant. It was only right that the story that started in a bathroom should begin anew in one. “Will you—”



“Yes.” She flung herself at me and kissed me hard.

A faint cheering could be heard somewhere in the house, but my eyes were on one girl and one girl only wrapped around me like ivy clung to a home. She was home.

The End.