



Tarnished Vow

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: I called her my best friend. I treated her as mine. Until her family announces her arranged marriage. Taking her from me.

Psychotic. Psychopathic. The words commonly used to describe my crime family.

Marriage in my family is considered a life oath. With a book as thick as the bible on the rituals.

And we only marry to end wars.

For over four years I had kept her from learning just how twisted my family is. By hiding her as my friend.

But I don't like him touching her. And I hate the idea of her being his.

Not when she would look so good as mine.

My blood on her.

My name tattooed on her.

Mine. Not his.

Book 1 ends with a cliffhanger

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CHAPTER 1

Vince

Of course, he would have the lungs of a diver. Checking my watch. Fuck it. I pulled him out of the water and repeatedly hit his head on the corner of the kitchen bench. Nothing like blunt force trauma to speed up a death.

Finally, he went limp. What a fucking mess.

Immediately I fought back the urge to smash his head in again, when I saw the blood on my shirt. Great. Madeline would scold me for that. Even dead, this man caused me unnecessary problems.

I dropped his body and started to wash my hands.

The one thing she asked of me tonight and now, thanks to this fucker, I was breaking my word.

At least it is just on the shirt. The last thing I wanted was to upset her by ruining another suit.

Maybe she wouldn't notice.

I stepped over his body, rolled my sleeves down, and grabbed my suit jacket. Leaving them to clean up that bloody mess.

Over an hour late.

I closed the side door to the industrial kitchen and walked through the busy casino. I'd rather trade places with that prick than face the hundreds of people in that nightclub.

Thank fuck it was the last eighteenth birthday party. Any relief that thought gave me disappeared when I walked down the stairs.

Goddamn Bastion, and his need to have the music so loud. The longer I looked around, the faster my blood rushed. I pushed through the thick crowd of people to the second lounge.

Practicing my breathing exercises as I walked towards Nikolai at the bar.

"I thought we agreed on not letting Cecilia remodel an entire fucking club for one night?" I pointed back upstairs. So that explained why so many of our subcontractors were unavailable last week.

Of course, he said yes to her. Behind my back. Like normal.

"She was upset after we said no to the yacht." Nikolai shrugged as if he had any intention of not letting her have exactly what she wanted. Come tomorrow, when Sofia is upset with us about this, he can deal with it.

Shaking my head, I walked away from him. Unbelievable. Keep it even. He preaches to me daily and turns around and does this.

It was impossible to miss Madeline in a crowd. I hated how people found her so approachable. It took all my self-restraint to not glare or inflict pain at the random people always talking to her.

Wrapping my arm around her waist, pulling her back to me. Finally, I took my first easy breath since arriving here tonight. Until I realized who she was talking to.

My fucking luck.

“Vince, do you know Ivan?” She ran her fingers along my arm, not taking her eyes off him for a second.

Glaring at his extended hand. I barely tolerated his family. But for her. Don't break his hand. Don't break his fucking hand.

One hour late and this is what happens.

God, give me patience.

He went straight back to talking to her, and I wanted to choke that smile off his face.

Only Madeline could turn that man into a devoted pet.

I should have killed him when I was a teenager, instead of settling with only taking his kidney.

He was basically fucking her with his eyes. Over the years, I had gotten used to how men stared at her. How she dresses, moves, speaks. Everything about her drew them closer.

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She did it on purpose.

Though, normally they don't get this close.

Holding her tighter to me; knowing damn well he wanted to hug her goodbye.

So far, I've hated every single one of the men her family has presented as a possible husband.

"Really, Ivan?" I couldn't hide my annoyance when he finally fucked off.

"He's so sweet," she turns in my arm, "But their main trade is guns." her fingers hovered on my missing cufflinks.

I reached into my pocket, handing them to her, and noticed her new nails. That explained why she left me in bed this morning. How many times had I told her to get them to come to the house instead of leaving me?

"Vinny, you're late and grumpy." she pulled my sleeve down, threading the cufflinks through. "What's wrong?"

"Nik, let Cecilia remodel the club." Brushing her hair from the side of her face, "Next week, Bastion is going to be whining at me, because Nik let her ruin his nightclub. That's if Sofia doesn't throw a fit before that."

The corner of her lips twitched up as she leaned into me. "Of course Nik did. After you gave her the plane a year early."

But that at least made sense. Next week, Cecilia left for that art thing overseas.

“What did Ivan want?” I glared at him and his wannabe gangsters. This was Nikolai’s fault and that open door policy.

“Just organizing dinner with my grandparents,” she touched my cheek, trying to get my attention, “Go tell Cecilia good night. Otherwise, we won’t make it in time for the twins.”

“I already did. No way in hell am I going up there to see her with a barely legal boy.” I glanced up at the balcony.

“Or man,” she shrugged. She just couldn’t help herself.

Regardless, I don’t want to know. Unless they hurt her, it’s none of my business.

“Are you ready to leave?” I checked my watch again. So, we had the twins’ hotel opening, then... there was something else.

“Wait,” she went up on her toes, wiping something off my neck with the sleeve of her dress. “You promised me no blood tonight!” Then her eyes narrowed on my shirt. Of course, she noticed.

“I’m sorry, my love,” kissing the back of her hand, “It’s not my fault, I tried. He wouldn’t fucking drown.”

My phone vibrated in my pocket. Reading the message, it was just Roman reminding me about the twins’ hotel opening. He must be worried I’d forgotten.

After the headache that hotel was to construct, I’d never forget it.

Holding her hand as we walked through the nightclub. Had the crowd got bigger since I arrived?

Fucking people.

That thumping music slowly becoming a distant thud with every step.

Immediate relief when we walked out into the lobby.

“Before when you said dinner with your grandparents, which ones did you mean?”

Moving my hand down her waist.

“Dad’s side.”

For some reason, that made me feel uneasy. “Are your uncles going to be there?”

I lifted her over the paved crushed rock as we walked outside. Those heels were dangerous enough on a flat surface.

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She nodded. They must be closer to deciding.

I opened the back door of the black SUV, helping her up into the car. While that same knot in my stomach got tighter. Her grandparents having dinner with him made me really fucking uneasy.

“I could do a drug lord, but marrying into a family whose main trade is guns. It would just take away what I do....” She sighed, looking at me, “probably sounds stupid, and poor business, right?”

When it came to her arranged marriage, I had promised myself I would not influence her decision. So I shrugged and closed the door.

Though every day that passed, it was growing extremely harder to not have an opinion. Every single one of them I loathed.

CHAPTER 2

Madeline

“But why can't it be pink or teal? What has the color black ever done for guns for it to be considered the mandatory dress code for gun deals?”

My heart was racing faster than I ever thought possible, while I spoke every thought that came to my mind.

“My love, why don't you go to the waiting room?”

I shook my head. Nope. I was not leaving, even if seeing that amount of blood made me want to faint and swear off wearing red for the rest of my life.

I focused on his non-injured arm. Until Vince started rubbing my side.

“No, stop that,” I took his hand off my waist. “I’m comforting you, remember?”

Holding his hand and stroking his thumb. “Where’s that doctor? They said five minutes? It’s been ten.”

A rush of white panic went through me again. Why were they taking so long?

“I got blood on your dress.”

“I don’t care. I hate this dress anyway.”

“Is that so?” he moved my hand to his shoulder, before holding my waist again.

I nodded, “I hate red.” I glanced at his bloody arm. “And I really, really hate crimson.”

The door opened. Immediately, I’m disappointed to see Nikolai and not the doctor. Then, I saw how angry he was.

“Nik, practice your breathing exercises.” I pointed at him, “the last thing I need is you in here too, having another heart attack or your medication increased.”

He forced a fake reassuring smile to calm me down. But I refused to look away until he listened to me.

Turning back around. My other hand going to Vince’s cheek. Of all nights for some random thug to try to stab him.

“So, we found?—”

“No, absolutely not,” I shook my head, speaking over Nik, “We are not talking about it. Not while half his arm is cut open. He’ll get worked up. The blood will start rushing faster and he’ll die.”

I held onto Vince’s shoulder tighter.

The door opened again. Finally, the doctor was back. The medical tray she was holding sent an immediate wave of anxiety through me.

Vince moved his hand down my back, pulling me to his side.

“My love, hey, trace my tattoos for me. It always calms me down.” He kissed my cheek, turning his body to keep his arm out of my view.

I nodded, running my nail over his shoulder, slowly tracing the tattoo down his arm. Leaning my forehead against his cheek.

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“Hey Maddy, your cousin Greyson is here, says it’s important.”

Sighing loudly.

“Go, I’ll be here when you get back.” Vince gently touched my chin. “I promise.”

It better not be like earlier and his promise of no blood, because he had failed to keep it twice. Though the second time, it wasn’t his fault.

Glancing at the doctor again. “I’ll only be a minute.” I kissed his cheek twice before turning, looking between Nikolai and Bastion.

“Don’t you two dare leave this room.”

Bastion held the door open for me. I swear to God if Greyson had summoned me over something petty, I’d slap him.

Walking down the hospital hall. Greyson and Uncle Cole were standing in the waiting room.

“It’s unlike you, Maddy, to not answer your phone.” Uncle Cole didn’t even wait for the door to shut.

“I left it in the car, I think. What’s so important?”

“This,” Greyson tossed me his phone, “You’ve taken the night off to be with the Crows. While we are dealing with this!”

He could not be serious.

One minor miscommunication, caused by their own actions. Glaring at him and his unruly hair. I stepped forward, slapping him hard.

“These are called consequences. When you make a commitment and fail to keep it.” Backhanding his other cheek. “My advice is to apologize to them. Take a moment to be humble and learn a lesson of respecting the time of others.”

Shaking my head. Unbelievable. How could he justify sending those empty-worded threats? This is exactly how things escalate so quickly.

Taking a deep breath.

“Now, Uncle Cole, don’t forget Zeke’s birthday next weekend. Greyson, I’m making an appointment for you to get your hair cut. No cousin of mine will walk around town looking like an uncared for, palm tree.” I handed him his phone back. “I’ll send you the time and place, understood?”

He nodded, still holding his cheek as he took the phone off me.

“Good. In two days, you both will apologize to me for wasting my time. And Greyson, do not send me white roses again. Any color but white. Actually,” I paused, “or red. That color is offensive to me at the moment.”

Leaving the door open as I walked out. If the circumstances had been different and they had woken me up for that, I might have just stabbed him.

Lucky for him, I have a deep disliking for knives tonight.

“Nik, give me that fucking needle. I won’t let this glorified paper cut upset her all

over again when she gets back.”

Unbelievable.

I pushed the door open fully. Lucky for Vince, the doctor tapped my shoulder and asked to get past me before I could yell at him for being off the bed. This is exactly why I have to supervise him.

“I don’t care if half the people in the strip club have overdosed. You aren’t leaving.” I turned the dressing room light off walking into the bedroom.

Vince was sitting up in bed, tapping the back of his phone.

It had taken an effort to get him home from the hospital and stop him from going to the strip club once he heard what happened.

“You can’t step in and take over every time things get hard. Give Rome a chance to prove to you he can handle this.”

Climbing on to his bed, I crawled to his side.

“Have some faith in yourself, okay?” I took his phone off him. “You’ve raised him well. If he really needs your help, he will call.”

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Vince's love for his siblings was admiring. If he could protect them from every small little inconvenience in this world, he would. They had no idea how lucky they were to have that type of love.

Finally he nodded, laying back down and wrapping his arm around my waist, pulling me back to his chest.

"Nope, not happening, move your arm," I sat up slightly, "I'm not sleeping on your sore arm all night."

"Fine." he rolled me over. "You can have my side."

Brushing my hair away from my neck, he kissed my cheek. "I'm sorry about tonight."

My throat tightened. Carefully taking his hand and kissing his knuckles. Before holding him tighter.

He was the only good thing about my life.

I couldn't handle losing him. I wasn't even sure how I'd handle the changes that were coming when I was married.

CHAPTER 3

Vince

“Yeah, I’ll handle it when I get back,” I spoke to Nikolai on the phone, keeping an eye on Madeline with the designer.

Three weeks I had been meaning to bring her here. If I hadn’t got her on the plane this morning, I knew it wouldn’t happen again.

Ending the call. Unlike her, I wasn’t fluent in other languages, but my glare and fists were. If those two didn’t work, money always did.

Which is exactly how I got the store open in the middle of the night.

It was worth it when I saw her eyes light up.

Only she would look at a pair of heels with so much love.

“How did you know?” She asked, that cute little frown on her face.

“I listened.” I tucked her hair behind her ear. “And someone left the browser tab open on my phone with the designers’ details.”

Fuck. I might do anything to see her smile like that.

Kissing the side of her head. While the designer continued to speak quickly and passionately in a language, I didn’t understand. But going off her smile, whatever he was saying, made her happy.

“One of ten, Vince. They are a piece of art.” She turned the heel over. “Look at the diamonds and the white gold trim across the strap. Aren’t they beautiful?”

All I saw was another pair of high heels that come the end of the night, I’d be carrying home, while she wore the flat shoes that I had one of the soldiers carry all

night for her.

Playing with her hair while they kept talking. By the way her eyes wandered, I could guarantee that wouldn't be the only pair of high heels coming back with us.

Flicking my lighter open and closed. My patience draining with every second that passed while she was on the phone.

Could her uncles not learn to call at a reasonable time? Which, if I had a choice, was never. Dropping my lighter on the bedside table, I grabbed her waist, pulling her back to my lap.

Nothing annoyed me more than when they called her. Nine out of ten times, it was followed by her leaving. Checking the time, twenty past two in the morning.

Running my hand up her bare leg. We had been minutes away from getting into bed. I kissed the back of her shoulder just before she climbed off me.

Great. I knew what was about to come next. As expected, she ended the call, telling them she would be at the airfield in half an hour.

“You shouldn't be going anywhere. You haven't slept.”

“I'll just sleep when I get there, like normal.” She pulled my shirt off and walked into the wardrobe to get dressed.

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“How come every time they fuck up, it becomes your problem?” And then by default it annoys me. Because they take her from me. “Tell them to get another fixer and a negotiator.”

Every god damn time a problem occurs, she is called in. With the number of uncles and cousins she has, that phone doesn't stop.

“You're being grumpy again.”

Watching as she packed her things. Grumpy was the wrong word for it. Furious. Might be closer.

“I'll be back tomorrow,” she walked towards me, “Or this weekend.”

I groaned. A week.

“Depends on if Uncle Zeke wants to talk to me.”

Running my thumb across her jaw. “Message me when you land.” I stared at her mouth for a moment before kissing her cheek. “Promise.”

She kissed the back of my hand before stepping away from me. “I promise.”

Now I had a long night by myself, and worse, a week without her. Knowing her uncles at the coast, they would drag out her visit and keep her there for two weeks.

CHAPTER 4

Madeline

Powerful men and toxic ego complexes consumed most of my day. It was always the biggest of issues, starting over small things. Sometimes it was hard not to remind them I wore heels bigger than most of their dicks.

God forbid I had a style while I twisted their minds into being rational.

They liked to think they were in control, but they walked at my pace, leaned closer as I spoke, and after hearing a few compliments, they were always willing to end up changing their mind.

I was never considered a threat. To be fair. I wasn't one. They never stood a chance of not doing exactly what I wanted. But everyone has weaknesses.

Today I was reminded. Just how weak I was when it came to my grandparents and mother.

"It's a different shade." I shook my head. "See," I moved closer to Vince, showing him the very noticeable change of color between the dress I was wearing and the dress on the hanger.

Instead of answering, he just smiled. As if he couldn't see the clear color difference. Honestly, I don't even know why he insisted on coming this morning.

I walked back to the rack in the dressing room, placing the dress back. Just as the door opened, two more racks being dragged in.

Normally shopping is a delight, but today it felt like pulling teeth. All this overthinking would end up aging me.

One shop assistant left, the other stayed ready to help me change.

“Fuck off,”

I looked over my shoulder. “Vince, be nice.”

“Fine, fuck off, please?”

“Sorry about him. He’s grumpy this morning.” I apologized to her before she walked out of the room, nearly in tears.

“You’re so rude.” I started to pull the zip down, when he took over. “You know you don’t have to stay.” I held his arm, stepping out of the dress.

Something was wrong with him this morning. I just couldn’t work out exactly what it was. Which is odd, normally I can read him easily. Maybe it was the bed at the penthouse. He rarely stays at the casino.

“Madeline, are you okay?”

I hadn’t even realized I was staring at him.

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I nodded, “Why?”

“You’re not normally this...” he stopped, as if worried he had done something to upset me. “Indecisive.”

Oh. He was talking about the dresses.

“Just my grandparents freak me out. Especially my dad’s side.”

He frowned. “What’s that got to do with this?”

“The dress is for the dinner with them.” I paused at the rack. “Can they even call it a dinner, when no one will be eating?”

He looked at me, genuinely confused.

“I havethemeeting with my grandparents tomorrow night,” I repeated, as he still stared at me completely blank. “The formal one with his family,” I repeated it slower, so he could catch up.

There are rare moments I am envious of the Crow's family power, but when it comes to this, I am. So much power that merging with other families isn't seen as necessary. Only needed to settle feuds, or if the Crows want to expand their operations.

I turned back to the rack. “I told my parents if I see any red flags before the wedding, I’ll be backing out. Regardless of the consequences.”

His silence made me look over my shoulder. “Are you okay?” he looked almost sick. Maybe that was what was wrong with him today.

“Fine,” he walked back to the seat, picking up his whiskey. “Try the last one on the second rack.” He pointed his glass behind me.

Walking to the second rack and pulling the dress down. Actually. This might be perfect. What would I do without him?

“We’ve got that new club and lounge opening tonight,” he lit a cigarette. “You’re coming right?”

“No smoking near all these dresses,” I pointed for him to put it out.

He did, but barely hid the fact he was annoyed with me about it. “So, tonight you’re coming, right?”

“Of course,”

He seemed to take an easy breath, still staring at me. “Turn around, I’ll do you up.”

Holding the dress to my chest. “Wait,” I took my bra off. Handing it to him instead of tossing it on the ground.

He started to do the clips

Now this style was perfect. Corset fitting. Black. Low cut front. Long and with a leg split.

His hand rested on my stomach, looking me in the eye. “Stunning.” He kissed my shoulder. “For tonight.”

Pouting, “Seriously?”

“Doesn’t really say dinner with the grandparents.” he kissed just below my ear, “But it’s perfect for you to wear sitting on my lap tonight.”

He was right. But I looked in the mirror at the racks, couldn’t stop the sigh.

Pulling me back to his chest, “Since when did I start having to talk you into shopping?” he held me tighter, “What about heels?” he moved my hair to the side, “You pick another dress, and we can change shops.”

I couldn’t even hide the delight. “And no whining?”

“Have I ever whined?”

I slowly moved my head from side to side. “No, you’re rather perfect.” Tracing my nails over his arm. “Undo me.”

Right now, any dress for that dinner would be fine. I should know better than to think I could pick one that mom won’t hate. If I was wearing it, and she hadn’t picked it, she’d hate it.

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The dress went loose, holding his arm as I stepped out of it. I turned to face him, kissing his cheek. “I think the third dress I tried on. I’ll go with that one. Can you pass me my bra?”

He stood there, blinking at me. For a second, I thought maybe he hadn’t heard me because his response was so delayed. Finally, he reached beside him, handing it to me.

Something was definitely different with him this morning.

VINCE

“Busy night, brother?” I looked from the half-beaten man to the gun in his hand.

This wasn’t like Bastion. Wired. Angry. I gestured for the three men behind him to leave.

“So. What did he do?”

Bastion looked at me. “Stole a shitload of drugs from me. Made me look like a fucking idiot.”

I nodded. So, a bruised ego and embarrassment. Never a good mixture for making a clear decision.

Reaching for my gun, I pointed it at the back of the man's head, pulling the trigger.

“What the fuck, Vince!” Bastion shoved me. “I’m not a fucking kid!”

“Look at me.” grabbing him, “Every drug sold, every dollar embezzled, and every life taken. The decisions we make we have to live with.” I pointed at the body. “I couldn’t give a fuck what that man did. Hear me? If killing him takes you from us. You stop. You call me, you call Nikolai. You wait and organize a hit. You do not let anyone take you from us?”

He shoved me away. “I could handle it.”

“There will be a time you can, but this isn’t it.”

One look at him and I knew he wasn’t thinking right. Anything can be justified in the moment. Living with it, though, when the rage is gone, that’s completely different.

This is why Nikolai and I had rules in place with them. How many times have we told them? We think our decisions through. I wouldn’t lose him to another man’s ghost.

I pointed to the side room. “Get cleaned up. They’re waiting for us at the casino. And Bastion,” I cut the ties off the man’s wrists. “This fucker won’t care if you can’t close your hands for a week, or that your knuckles burn every time you wash them. You only use your own fists when you want the reminder you handled it. Understand?”

In a few days, I’d pick this conversation backup. Right now, it wasn’t the time.

All night she had been gone. I never hated a game as much as I hated blackjack for taking her from me.

I grinned while holding the side of her face. Damn, I had missed her smile all night. “How much did you lose?” Touching her bottom lip with my thumb.

“Not nearly as much as you’ve had to drink.”

“I’m good, Rome though.” I scoffed. “Went way too hard early. We’re going to a new, um.” I clicked my fingers at Bastion.

“Club?” Madeline finished my sentence.

I nodded, running my hand up her side.

She stepped in front of me. “I can’t come; I have a debt to settle.”

What?

“Maddy caught a fish,” Rome grinned.

“More like a shark.” She winked at him.

Huh. Since when did she like seafood? Maybe I had drunk too much. Or they had.

“Behave, Vinny, okay?” She kissed my cheek before stepping out of my reach.

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Wait. Who the fuck was that?

“Madeline Thorne, you’re extremely slow.” A man I had never seen before was waiting for her.

“Noah, my heels are for style, not speed.” She walked straight to his side.

Wrapping his arm around her. Wait. She was leaving with him. I frowned, watching them at the valet.

“What kind of wanker has a convertible?” I muttered, watching him lift her into his car.

“Don’t you own multiple convertibles?” Bas grinned, “actually we’ve seen you put Maddy into a convertible just like that.”

I shoved his hand off my shoulder. At least he was back to his normal self.

“If a dysfunctional couple had to have a picture. I’d put Maddy and you next to it.”

“Fuck off, we’re just friends.”

“Sure, cause matching your shoes to her heels is just what friends do.” Bas laughed.

“Vince, who picked your rings tonight?”

It made her happy when our outer soles were the same color.

I looked at my hands. Pinky ring I had always worn, those two rings I had worn every day since she put them on a few years ago and the other two, well she chose them for tonight.

My left hand always matches her jewelry for the night.

“How much do you think he had to drink?” I looked between Bas and Rome.

Was something funny? Why were they grinning like that?

“Alright, we’re here.” Luca appeared with Nik. “Did we miss something?”

“Nothing, let’s go.” Bas started to walk off with Luca

“I’ll meet you guys there.”

“Like hell you will,” Rome shook his head, “you aren’t going to playback the security footage to count how many drinks that man has had. Loosen up brother. She can take care of herself.”

He didn’t get it. What if that wanker is over the limit and crashes the car, killing the only person I care about other than them?

I nodded, “Fine let’s go.” I’ll just playback the footage remotely and count his drinks. If he had more than one. He would be breathing through a tube when I found him.

CHAPTER 5

Madeline

Walking around the bend down to the creek. As expected, Rome was standing at the

bank, staring at the water.

“It’s rather cold this morning.” I reached for the tree, my platform boots slipping. Holding in any comment about sliding to my death. Considering the circumstances, after all.

He looked over his shoulder. Clear annoyance in his eyes. Well, he would have to get over it. Only my own death would stop me from pestering him on her anniversary.

Watching the muscle in his jaw tighten, pretending to ignore me as I slipped again. Oh. Fuck it. I picked the wrong boots.

“Maddy, I’m fine.”

Staring at his broad back. I could think of many ways to describe him. Fine wouldn’t be one of them.

Standing at the tree, holding on for dear life to a branch. While glaring at the mud, which was threatening to ruin my light teal dress.

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“Maddy. I’m fine.” He glanced back at me.

“I know.”

“I’m not going to do anything.”

I nodded.

Frustrated, he turned to look at the river. “Do you have nothing better to do on a Sunday morning? Where is Vince? Shouldn’t you be asleep with him?”

I shrugged, smiling. “Actually, now you mentioned it, I’m rather hungry. Take me out for breakfast?”

He turned to glare at me. “I’m not going to kill myself, Maddy. I’ve accepted it, I’m fine.”

“Of course you’re not going to kill yourself.”

“Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“Oh, gosh no. If I thought you were going to do that, I would drag Vince down here with me every year.”

If he jumped in the river, I could not save him.

His expression dropped slightly. “Then why are you here?”

He didn't make her get into the car, and he couldn't have stopped her from losing control. He blamed himself for an accident.

"So you aren't here by yourself." Perhaps my actions over the years weren't as obvious as I hoped. "And you know me. I'm a sucker for an early morning." I forced a very fake smile.

The corner of his lips twitched up. "Don't let go of that branch until I'm up there. If you fall, I'll never hear the end of it."

"Oh please. I'm not that bad. Sure, I love this dress. But even I understand context."

Watching him climb up the bank, before standing beside me.

"I was talking about Vince." Steadying an arm around me, as we walked back to the road.

"That's fair. He does tend to overreact at times."

"He is going to take your wedding hard." Letting go of me as we walked along the concrete road.

"He'll be okay."

Rome shoved his hands in his pockets. "It's going to be weird not having you around all the time."

Holding my smile back. Moments ago, he was annoyed to see me.

"Can you call the driver down now? Or am I going to have to walk the full compound?"

His lips twitched into a full grin. “Only if you admit you’ll miss us, too.”

“You do realize I’m not dying, right?” Probably the wrong choice of words. “Sorry, bad taste.” Clearing my throat. “And of course I’ll miss you all, but again, I’m still around. Vince and I will still be friends.”

“I never understood why you went along with it, you know.” Rome paused, looking at me. “In his head, he thinks it’s a friendship. But you’ve always known better, right?”

“You’ve heard him. I’m not his type, and he doesn’t see me like that.”

Watching the car pull around the bend, of course, he had already organized a pickup.

“I’m sorry Maddy.”

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“For?”

“How fucked up Vince is. Our family. Maybe things could have been different.”

I shrugged. Maybe this was just how it was supposed to be. There was no point on focusing on what can't be changed.

So much for him behaving last night. “Big night?” I smiled as Vince walked into the kitchen, looking extremely hung over. Even after a shower, he didn't seem a bit better.

“Come back to bed with me.” he moved my hair to the other side, kissing my neck. He was so needy when he was hungover. “Please, come back to bed with me.”

“You eat this, and I will,” I slapped his hand away and turned around to face him. “Not out of the pan. I already told you. I'm not going anywhere today.”

“Good,” he cupped my face, “I've missed you.”

“I thought I was annoying,” I smiled, as he lifted me up, putting me on the island.

“No, I said that stupid show was annoying.”

“Which I was watching.”

“It takes your attention for hours.”

“Oh, how did you cope without my undivided attention?”

“I didn’t cope,” his fingers moving to the back of my dress. I knew damn well what he was doing.

“Wait,” I kissed his cheek, “I need to—” I stopped mid sentence as I watched him turn the stove off, move the frypan and put the bacon on another plate.

What a surprise, just like normal, within seconds, he was eating it.

“Absolutely not.” I shook my head as he started to cut it up. I was not eating that. “Do you have any idea how many calories is in that? Because I do.” I closed my mouth tightly.

I should have known what he was up to when he got the knife and fork. “Come on Madeline, for me.”

Knowing he wouldn’t drop it until I gave in to him. I opened my mouth. Immediately, his grin got bigger, as I took it.

Within minutes, he was carrying me to his bedroom. He always complained that I got distracted. To be fair, he was right. I normally did.

I took my dress off and climbed into bed beside him. The curtains started to close, and he handed me his phone.

Online shopping.

I sighed, completely contented, as he fell back to sleep, hugging me. While I charged the credit card he had saved under My Loves.

CHAPTER 6

Madeline

I sat on Vince's bed, staring at my phone. I had to make a choice. Ivan or Noah. After formal dinners with both families' weeks ago. I couldn't keep putting it off.

"Why can't you come again?" Vince walked out of the wardrobe, still not ready to leave. If he dragged this out any longer, he would be arriving when everyone had left.

"Because thinking this hard is aging me." Pouting, I reached for him, starting to button up his shirt. "I'm not even joking, Vinny. I'm going to need Botox before the wedding." Reaching for his hand.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking your rings off," well technically the two I had forced him to wear.

"Why?"

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“Because rings are an easy conversation starter. If a woman asks who gave them to you, and you answer me. She would read it the wrong way.” Dropping them on the bedside table.

“And why is a woman suddenly making useless small talk with me?”

It was overdue for him to be talking to other women other than just me. If anything, I had been selfish the last few years, obnoxiously taking all his time.

Instead of explaining it, I shrugged, grabbing my phone off the bed. The same knot in my stomach when I saw a message from Noah.

“So, which one are you going to choose?”

He had his hands in his pockets, still procrastinating. Shaking my head, I walked into the wardrobe getting his jacket off the hanger.

“This whole time, I thought Ivan, but Noah is...” I handed him the jacket. “Persistent. I know it’s his ego. The man just hates being told no. That’s what is turning me off. There is a thin line between possessive and controlling.” Shaking my head, “Do you hear how much I’m overthinking this?”

He just stared at me. I know I’ve gotten bad when he doesn’t even have an opinion.

“Alright, I’m leaving. Are you coming too, or do you want to take twenty minutes to put on your shoes?”

My phone buzzed again. Another message from Noah. How did this man not see that this type of behavior was scaring me away? Unlocking my phone. Vince was finally ready to leave, walking down the stairs beside me.

Maybe I had overreacted. Noah had only sent the pictures of us from the other evening. We did look good together.

Stepping outside, Vince closed the front door after us.

“I can drop you off home on the way,”

“And leave my car here?” I smiled. Geez, he might do just about anything not to go tonight. Running my hands over his jacket. “You look good, incredible even.” Stepping back. God help the other men there tonight. “Goodnight Vinny.”

He pulled me back, hugging me. I’d miss this. More than I should. More than I had a right to.

“Good night, Madeline.” He let go of me.

Turning quickly, I looked down at my phone, holding back the tears. It was easier to pretend that it wouldn’t be the last time we hugged like that.

How many times had he told me he only saw me as a friend? I’ve accepted it. But our friendship was never normal.

Now, though, it had to be.

CHAPTER 7

Vince

The faster I ran, the tighter the feelings were choking me. I just couldn't understand it. I had ran the full compound and still felt frustrated.

I pushed myself harder as I went through the gates to my house. Rounding the bend, Luca was sitting on my front steps.

First Bastion attempted to join me for my run, only to fake an injury before we reached Rome's house, and now Luca is waiting for me. Had I forgotten something?

He tossed me a bottle of water. That look on his face was similar to when he had to tell Cecilia her cat was dead.

If I had a cat, I'd be worried.

My breathing was still heavy as I watched Nikolai's car pull into my driveway.

Right. Something had happened. A visit from the oldest and the youngest brothers.

Finishing the water, Nik stepped out of the car with two coffees. Really? When did my intake of fluids become their concern?

Leaning against the pillar, "What's this?" I gestured between the two of them, just getting my breathing under control.

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“Thought you might be hung over.” Nikolai handed the coffee to Luca when it was clear I wouldn’t take it.

“Same,” Luca nodded.

I didn’t drink last night, and they were both there. I stared at them, way too out of breath to push for answers.

Fine, I’ll just believe they both had the same concern for this terrible hangover that I got from not drinking.

“So, um, how’s your day going?” Luca asked, tapping his coffee. Looking at me.

It’s eight in the morning. The day hadn’t started. I can’t tolerate stupid questions when I’m this angry.

“We’re just checking on you. Is it that shocking to know we’re concerned?” Nik sipped his coffee, looking at me as if I should understand.

“Concerned about?”

Luca cursed under his breath.

“Concerned about?” I repeated.

“Maddy announced her engagement.” Nikolai sighed, dropping his shoulders.

So, she made her choice. “That’s it?” I looked between them again. I had known she was getting engaged.

“Yep, that’s it.”

“Which one did she pick?”

“Noah Voss.” Nik tilted his head, as if trying to study my reaction. Which bothered me.

I nodded. “Anything else?”

“Nope, just thought you might be upset to learn the woman you love is marrying someone else, but you know,” Nikolai shrugged his shoulders. “We’re clearly just wrong.”

“I told you all. We’re just friends. That’s it.”

Luca ran his fingers through his hair, standing up. “But you do realize that friendship changes now, right?”

Why did they keep telling me that? I wasn’t stupid. “No, not at all. I’m sure her husband won’t care if she stays at my house every second night.”

Luca shook his head, pointing his coffee at me. “Forget it. This will be a good learning experience for you.”

I scoffed; I’d learned things he couldn’t live with. Turning, I walked up the steps. I needed a shower.

I couldn’t message her. It just felt wrong to congratulate her like that. But knowing

her routine, I waited across the street to see what store she would pick.

I should have known it would be shoes. Walking into the designer store, ignoring the retail assistant. Until I saw her being escorted to a private fitting room. After the assistant walked past me, I went to the room.

Madeline turned, that polite smile turning to a real one. I'd missed seeing it.

“What are you doing here?”

I shrugged. “I wanted to congratulate you.” Closing the door, “On the engagement.”

She frowned, watching as I walked towards her. “Right.” Placing her glass down, her ring catching my attention for the first time. That wasn't the type of ring she had wanted. Why didn't she tell him that when he gave it to her?

So, she's just expected to wear a ring she doesn't like for the rest of her life.

The door opened, the assistant not saying anything as she placed the shoes down. I sat patiently and silently as Madeline tried on the other heels. Though I did insist on helping her take each pair off and on.

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After nearly an hour, the assistant left to process the order. I pulled Madeline back to my lap, before she fell while trying to put her heels back on standing up.

Within seconds, she was off me. The assistant walked back in and asked what account to charge the bill too.

I did a double take when she said Noah Voss. When had he created an account here? The assistant left, and Madeline turned, looking at me.

“Do we need to talk about this Vince?” she gestured between us.

Yeah, we did. I had an issue with her using his account.

“We can’t be so...” she paused, “we’re too comfortable with each other. And it’s unfair to Noah. So,” she dropped her head back, “You know what I’m talking about, right?”

I stared at her. Not really. I had no issues with how we were.

Straightening her shoulders back. “I’m not yours to touch Vince, and you’re not mine. So, from now on, just friends.”

We were always friends. I nodded. “Fine,” I won’t touch her, seeing her fiancé might have an issue with it. Gripping the edge of the chair. “But I have an issue with you charging his account. Just use mine, please. I don’t want you indebted to him.”

“So I can be indebted to you instead?” she arched her eyebrows, her lips twitching

up. “He insisted I did. I’m shopping for a trip, that he asked me to go on with him. Otherwise, I would have charged mine.”

My stomach turned. Engaged not even a week, and he was already taking her away from my city.

“What is next, kids?” I scoffed, standing up.

It was her lack of reaction that shocked me.

“Maybe, I don’t know.” She crossed her arms. “What about you? Have you given any thought to your future?”

“Never thought about it. Hadn’t planned on making it past twenty-five, let alone being twenty-nine.”

“Well, it might be time you did.” She gestured to the door. “Are you coming?”

“No, I might just stay in a woman’s shoes shop for fun.”

She smiled, and it took all my self-restraint not to reach for her. Holding the door open for her, I shoved my hands in my pockets.

I’m not yours to touch Vince, and you’re not mine.

How did one sentence cause so much rage?

CHAPTER 8

Madeline

Opening the duffle bag, I continued to empty my clothes from Vince's wardrobe. It was stupid how emotional I was getting. We weren't a couple.

"Madeline?"

Closing my eyes for a moment. So much for getting this packed before he got home.

"In here." I replied. Quickly trying to compose myself before he walked in. Last thing I needed was him finding me upset in his wardrobe.

"What are..." he paused at the door, his voice changing as he saw the room.

It was just stuff. Stuff that I probably should never have left here. "Sorry, I thought I'd have it all out of here before we got dinner."

He slowly looked up from the packed bags to me. "Right."

Opening the dresser, I stared at my jewellery, though each piece had a matching piece for him beside it. I started to realise now I fucked up.

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“Moving out.” He muttered,

“I’m not even sure when I moved so much stuff in.” Those pieces should be together. I closed the top drawer and opened the second. “How was your day?” I kept my focus on the black cushions of all my earrings. Actually. I was leaving all this. Too many pieces he had brought me and over the years, everything just blended together.

Moving to the second bay. If I had a choice, I might have left everything, but that wasn’t fair to the woman he meets. She deserves an empty wardrobe, not one filled with clothes of a woman he only saw as a friend.

“Madeline?”

I turned. Had he said something? By his expression, he had. “Sorry, what did you say?”

He shook his head. “Forget it.”

I forced a smile. “Um, actually, about dinner. Can we reschedule it?” Taking my skirts off the hangers. “I’m on this really strict diet for the wedding and I can’t afford Mom thinking I broke her meal plan.”

“Let me guess, a liquid diet.”

My hand froze on the hanger. Sometimes I hated how well he knew my life.

I nodded. “Broth, always the lowest calories.” I pushed the empty coat hangers to the

side.

“When you reschedule, you mean cancel.”

Yeah. I really hated how he knew me so well. “It might just be easier for the moment.” Finally emptying the last drawer. “Anyway, I’m not eating.” I tried to make light of it, but his intense stare just made it harder.

“I’ll help, um,” he looked around the room. “Carry them down.”

I smiled. I was sure if we gave it enough time; we would adjust to this new friendship.

CHAPTER 9

Vince

“The blonde Malibu model is here. I bet she doesn’t even know anything about guns,” Ellie leaned away from me, speaking to Hazel. “How is it possible to be that happy all the time?”

“Well, she is marrying Noah Voss.” Hazel placed her wineglass down on the bar. “He is a complete dick, but one I would ride.”

“She has every man here lusting over her.” Ellie ordered more drinks, “Vincent, are you going to get off that phone at all tonight?”

Not if I wanted to stay sane. I had nothing but respect for my cousins’ wives. If they called me. I would answer. I took an oath to protect them. But the same could not be said for Vivienne’s sisters. Who were fucking insufferable.

“Sorry about that.” Jamison was back. His wife still nowhere to be seen. The bastard left me with them. He might be apologizing to his wife’s sisters, but it should be directed at me.

“Vince!”

Locking my phone, I looked up. Two weeks. The longest we had gone without speaking to each other. Every time I went to call her, I stopped myself.

“Madeline,” I smiled. It almost felt unnatural. She stopped in front of me. I’d missed seeing her smile. “How was your holiday?”

“How did you know about that?”

Because I had a unhealthy addiction to needing to know she was okay.

“I didn’t go. I, um, had a business trip that was more important.” She winked. Gripping my glass tighter. Why hadn’t she told me she was going overseas for a gun deal? She might treat negotiating gun shipments with warlords as normal, but it wasn’t.

All this time, I thought she was on his private island.

Ellie cleared her throat. Seriously, we had been here for an hour, and she had gossiped about Madeline for most of it. Now she wanted an introduction.

“Oh, sorry for being rude. Madeline Thorne.” She turned, giving Ellie a smile she didn’t deserve.

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“Ellie.”

“It’s really nice to meet you.”

Ellie looked between us before lifting her head to the side. “Your fiancé is looking for you,”

Noah hadn’t taken his eyes off her since she walked over here.

Madeline touched my arm. “Talk later?”

I nodded, knowing that wouldn’t happen. Noah was still trying to intimidate me from across the room.

Any other man, I’d take away their sight. But I’d rather have him protective of her. It meant he cared.

“So, you can get off your phone for her?”

“For her, I’d take a bullet.” Finishing my drink, I placed the empty glass on the bar. “I need a smoke.”

Nikolai owes me for this. Forced to fucking socialize with those people because he had a reaction to his new medication. One hour in that room, and it made me wish for a heart attack.

Walking out onto the balcony. Five minutes of peace I got before the glass door

opened behind me.

“I thought you’d be out here.”

Closing my eyes for a moment. Maybe there was a god.

“I’m so proud of Nik for getting you here tonight. Honestly, I can only imagine how much you complained.” Madeline leaned against the rail next to me.

I glanced at her phone. “Seriously, you’re shopping?”

Rolling her eyes, “Um, it’s called multi-tasking.” She showed me a necklace. “What do you think of this one?”

“Doesn’t look like your style.”

“Awe, I love how you know me,” she touched my arm. “It’s not for me. I’m helping the Huntley’s organize a present for their sister. I owe them.”

“The Huntley’s don’t have a sister.”

“Shit. You can’t tell anyone about her. Okay?” She gasped, her hand holding me tighter. “I’m pretty sure they only told me, because we were going to die.”

And I was sure they had lied to her.

The Huntley brothers were only living because they stayed far away from us. She always insisted on using them for protection overseas. Ex-military or not. Their parents were responsible for half my family being dead.

But the only time she had been in danger was when she hadn’t used them. I gave her

my cigarette. Forcing myself to not think about them.

“What a shock you two are together,” Rome walked out the side door. Red wine down the front of his white shirt. “I offended Hazel,” he paused next to Madeline. “Do you have another one of those?”

“Oh, no. I don’t smoke.” Madeline took one drag of it before handing it back to me.

“What?”

“I only ever inhale twice. That’s basically less than secondhand smoke and I have never lit one. So, not a smoker.”

Rome looked at me. “So you wait for Vince to smoke, and you take his?”

“Vince, tell him. I’m not a smoker.”

“She’s not a smoker.” I handed him my packet.

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“You do know, you’re setting the bar for her fiancé, incredibly high. Right?”

Madeline huffed, “Why is it when I say it? People want to argue. But when you say it, they listen?”

“Probably so we can keep breathing.” Rome muttered, looking for his lighter. “Have you heard from Nikolai tonight?”

“Yeah. He’s fine.” I couldn’t say the same would be said for me if he didn’t take this social shit back over.

“I better go back to Noah.” She pushed herself away from the balcony. “Sorry about your shirt, Rome. I’m sure Hazel didn’t mean it.” Her eyes flickered to mine. “Night Vince.”

That smile.

“Night Madeline.” I watched her walk away.

“You two are so fucking dysfunctional.” Rome muttered. “We’ve got bets on when you start a fight to take her back. Can you wait until next month?”

I didn’t even warrant his question with a reply.

CHAPTER 10

Vince

“What?” I yelled at Rome. “You’ve got an opinion, huh? Not clean enough for you?”

I slammed the car door. I’ve sheltered them too much.

When human flesh becomes nauseating, that’s when I know I’ve been too hands on. Walking through the lobby, leaving him and the entourage of soldiers behind.

Since fucking when did we eat at this restaurant?

“Bad night?” Nik asked as I pulled up a seat to his right.

“We’ve been too easy on them.” I looked at the food. Great. “Fucking Luca, can’t you put something else on the menu other than steak? Every restaurant, same fucking menu.”

“This was a bad idea,” Bastion muttered under his breath.

Pushing the green leaf off the top of it. Why does every chef feel the need to dish up a fatty steak and chips, then pretend to hide how unhealthy it is under a leaf?

“Is Rome alright?” Luca looked over my shoulder.

I turned to look at him. “Physically yes. Morally no. What type of man passes out after seeing human tissue?” I scoffed, turning back around. “Oh, I know. One I’ve raised.” Cutting my steak, “Couldn’t handle it when I cut him open, let alone when I started peeling the skin back,” Swallowing my food, watching as Rome took a seat on the other side of the table. “Vomiting in the corner when I started on the second one.”

No surprise, Rome pushed the food away from him.

Nik called the waiter over, ordering a soda for him. Which just infuriated me more.

This is what he always did. Babied them.

“Well, did you get answers?” Nik asked, picking his knife and fork back up.

“Did I get answers?” I leaned back in my seat. “One lasted five minutes, the other though,” I raised my eyebrows, “twenty.”

The waitress placed the soda in front of Rome.

“Forty,” Rome corrected me.

I pointed my fork at him. “True. But I broke him within twenty. By that time, I’d committed. So he could wait until I was ready to stop.”

Nikolai chewed his food, staring at me.

Did I get answers? What a stupid question. He was lucky I was too angry with mister pale to get into a fight with him about it.

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Looking through the glass windows, I paused. Madeline. Why would she be here? Oh. That's why. Noah Voss.

"Rome, sip it, sugar helps with shock." Nik said.

Slowly chewing my food, watching the wannabe drug lord, whispering something in her ear. His arm around her back.

"I heard Voss is having problems with his supplier." Nik followed my line of sight. "We wouldn't have anything to do with that, would we?"

"Last time I checked, we don't deal with middlemen."

Noah kissed her on the side of her head before walking away. Watching as he passed the bar. I stood up. "I'll be back."

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Bastion muttered.

The house was empty; my life was empty. Every time I stepped into my wardrobe, all I felt was anger.

Sure, technically she still lived with her parents, but really, she lived with me. Where she belonged until her fucking family ripped her from me. The hate I had for them was doubling daily.

She looked up, shocked to see me. "Vince, what are you doing here?"

“No idea. My brothers organized dinner here.” I glanced back at them, only to focus on her.

Fuck. I’d missed her. Sliding into the booth next to her. Leaving my arm behind her.

“New earrings?” I gently touched her ear, moving her hair back.

She nodded.

Turning towards her, I touched her knee. “New dress?”

“Vinny,” she covered my hand with hers. “Are you okay?”

Just her touching my hand calmed me.

Frowning, she turned into me, her hand going to my cheek. “Have you been sleeping?”

Hard to sleep when I’m glaring at the ceiling every night angry.

A throat clearing caused my mood to change instantly. Turning to look at him. The way he glared at my arm behind her pissed me off. I didn’t have the self-control for this tonight.

Did he think he owned her? Leaning back, not taking my arm away.

“You’re in my seat, Crow.”

“Your seat? That doesn’t sound right.” Tapping my finger on the back of the booth
“Pretty sure it’s my last name on the door.” Dropping my arm behind Madeline. “So that would make it my seat.”

He grinned. “Right, I actually wanted to have a word with you, anyway.” He sat across from us in the booth. “I lost three suppliers in a week; you wouldn’t have anything to do with that, would you?”

“No. Middlemen are a bit below me in the food chain.”

He tapped the table. “Sure.” His lips twitched, as if amused by my answer. Before he focused on Madeline. “Let’s go.”

Let’s go.

Who did he think he was ordering her around?

I grabbed her knee under the table. I didn’t want her to go. But I sure as fuck wanted him to. Permanently even.

“Vinny, move, please.” She pushed my hand off, giving me a warning look.

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“Just slide to me, Maddy.” Noah tapped his side as if calling a dog.

Madeline looked at us. “Boys, I will climb over this table, ruining my dress before participating in this.” She gestured between us. “Noah is my fiancé, Vince. Respect that. Noah, Vince is my best friend. Understand the positions you both have?”

Noah nodded. “I know babe, I’m between your legs and he is...” he clicked his fingers at me. “The guy you tell all about it to. Might even learn some tricks, right Crow?”

Well, this is a first. I’d never killed someone over a sentence before.

“Exactly,” Madeline stood up.

Exactly.

Since when was our friendship worthless gossip? Why the fuck would I want to hear anything about him, let alone about his dick?

Looking at her, ready to remind her of that. But the sadness in her eyes hurt me, physically. Like she was stabbing me. Standing up, and out of her way before she climbed over me.

It took all my self-control to not grab her hand or pull her back to me. Gripping the edge of the booth tighter.

“Get some sleep, will you? Exhaustion doesn’t suit you.” She forced a smile before

walking straight to his side.

Seeing his hand on her ass as they walked out. It made me want to cut my own eyes out.

CHAPTER 11

Vince

I hated clubs. I hated the people. And now, without Madeline, it was impossible to suffer through. Especially when she was here, but not with me.

After ruining his connections with his suppliers. I had planned on stopping. But the chances of me not wiping out his family's operations fully, was growing slimmer and slimmer.

He wouldn't keep his hands off her.

“Again, I think we should call it a night.” Rome stood next to me at the glass window, following my eyes. “Come on, let's go.”

I shoved his hand off me. “No.”

“So, you'd rather just torture yourself and watch them all night?”

I finished my drink without answering him. At this rate it would be months before I'm justifying wiping their family out to Damius. I'd just have to do it before the wedding, so she didn't get hurt.

“That's it, I'm calling Nik.” Rome walked off. Leaving me alone in the office. The music was instantly more obnoxious when he opened the door for a moment.

Watching as she got up for the first time, leaving him. Now is my chance. Finally.
Placing the empty glass down.

Taking the side door. People. So many fucking people. And all of them were in my way as I made it downstairs.

My fear of missing her disappeared when I saw her standing in the hall with her eyes closed.

She's upset. That fucker has upset her.

“What happened?”

Opening her eyes, as if shocked to see me. Well, to be fair, I watched her all night through double tinted glass.

“Vince, what are you doing here?”

Placing my hand on her side. Three weeks. Three of the longest fucking weeks of my life. Each day, a reminder of my future.

“What did he do?”

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Please let it be worthy of his death.

“Nothing, I’m just tired,”

Keeping her out while she is tired. I could justify his death for that. But she is lying to me. Moving my hand to her back, pulling her closer to me.

Fuck. I’ve missed her.

“Come home with me,”

Resting her hands on my chest. “I can’t.”

“Fine,” my breathing sharper, as she moves her hand to my neck, “I’ll take you home.”

“I’m staying with the Voss’s this weekend. His fucked-up cousins are in town.”

“I can make them leave.” it wouldn’t be more than a few phone calls to have them removed from my city.

She smiled, but I wasn’t joking.

“I should get back to them,” she pushed my hand off her back.

I hated this. Ifuckinghated this.

“I don’t want you to go back to them.”

Instead of stepping back, I kept her trapped against the wall.

“Please don’t go back to them.” If she thought I was above begging, she was wrong.

“Okay. But then, what?” She moved her head back to stare at me. “This was always going to happen. You knew this.”

Sure, logically I did. But now, I was living it. And it was physically fucking painful to see her with him. Every day, my life was harder to live without her.

She sighed, “You’ll adjust.”

“And if I don’t?”

Closing her eyes, as if I was the one causing her pain. When this was all her fault for getting into an arranged marriage.

“If seeing me around is only making things harder, maybe?—”

“Don’t you dare fucking say it,” Holding the side of her face, forcing her to look back at me. The thought of her leaving my city just made the rage worse.

“Maddy?”

Fuck my life.

Turning my head to glare at the bastard. Noah Voss. What kind of name is that?

“Is everything okay?” He looked from her to me, then took a step forward. “People

told me about your thing with her,” he gestured to Madeline. “Actually, they warned me.”

My thing with her.

“Crow. She’s mine, she’s not yours. So, this,” he pointed between us. “is over understood?”

Did he just order me? He fucking did. Standing in my nightclub, in my city, thinking he could tell me what to do.

Dropping my arms. Fuck waiting for her to justify his death. I wanted him dead.

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“Noah. I need to talk to Vince.”

“How about you just say whatever it is in front of me, Maddy?” Noah shrugged, that same smug look on his face. “Or should I say, Madeline? Only you call her full name, right? Maybe I should take that too.”

She stepped in front of me, blocking my path. But that wasn't going to save him. “Vince, he is baiting you.” She grabbed my shirt, trying to get my attention.

“Come on Madeline, as fun as it is to see a Crow this helpless, I want to take you home.”

I grinned. Helpless. He was going to learn what helplessness was.

“Vince!”

Gritting my teeth. Fucking Roman called him.

“Is there a problem?” Nikolai asked Noah before giving me a firm look.

“No Nik, there isn't.” She turned away from me. “Where leaving? Isn't that right, Noah?” she walked past him and out the door.

Noah stood back for a moment before following.

“If he hurts her, I'm killing him.” Turning my glare from the door to Nikolai.

“So, you want a reason now? What a saw a second ago, you didn’t.”

“Fuck off Nikolai.”

“This is a problem.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, staring at me.

I glared at the closed door. I had changed my mind about her arranged marriage. And I had decided it wasn’t happening. I just had to think of a way to end it. Without Damius finding out about my interest in her.

CHAPTER 12

Vince

Gripping the man’s head back, holding the pliers. I was mid extraction when my phone started ringing. Only my sister’s ringtone would stop me.

“Your lucky day,” ripping his tooth out quick, “The next one is slower, hear me? Maybe rethink the go fuck myself comment and answer my question.”

Wiping the blood off my hand onto my shirt, before answering.

“Sofia, are you okay?”

“I. I need the invisible people,” her words muffled from sobbing.

Pure white panic rushed through me.

“What happened? Are you hurt?”

The bastard decided now was a great time to start screaming. I squeezed his throat for

silence.

“No. I...” she stopped, her crying louder. “I’m so stupid.”

Deep breaths. Closing my eyes. No shouting, calm voice. “What happened Sofia?”

“I was with this guy, and um, we, were at the gas station and...” her crying got louder, “and I didn’t know all the pumps did different things and...I thought I could help..” more sobbing, “I put the wrong fuel in, or something and I ruined his car. And we got into a fight, so I started walking, and now...” she sniffled, “I’m lost, Vin, I’m lost, and hungry.”

Deep breaths. Stay calm. “But you’re okay. He didn’t hurt you?”

“No, I’m just lost, and my feet hurt.”

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She's okay. "Alright, stop walking. I'll tell them to get you."

Letting the bastard go, calling her security team. "Pick her up, take her home. Stay at her door until I get there. Don't let that fucker from earlier near her for the rest of the night."

Ending the call. Great. I've strangled him. Moving his head. That or I broke his neck. Fuck, this day was never going to end.

"Clean this up, pick up his wanker of a partner. And.." I looked at the soldiers, trying to think of his name. "The other one that works the counter." Typing a message to our pilot. "Put them in the basement in separate rooms at the cellar. I'll deal with them when I get back. If I'm longer than two days, bread, water, nothing else. Understand?"

They nodded. So much for this being an early night.

"Anyone she saw tonight rest them for two months, then change them to Cecilia's security team." Finishing a message to Nikolai. I looked at the man that was still in my way.

He almost looked like he wanted to say something before stepping to the side. Smart move. Because my tolerance was at zero.

Opening her front door, then closing it.

I walked down the hall, running my hands over my face. Trying to wake myself up.

The lack of sleep was starting to add up.

Sofia was sitting on the couch, glaring at her phone. No surprise she wasn't asleep. Just like when she was a kid, she couldn't sleep when she was upset.

"I find throwing it helps." Leaning against the doorframe. "Sometimes smashing it too."

She looked up.

It was a nice change to not see fear in someone's eyes when they looked at me.

"You didn't have to come."

I shrugged, sitting across from her. "So big night?" I patted my pants, looking for my cigarettes.

Her bottom lip started trembling. "I've failed everything, Vin, everything. I'm just a stupid girl. I can't even pass a class."

Something else was wrong. I tapped my lighter on my cigarette packet. "You're not here to pass classes."

"It is college, Vin. It's the point." She pulled at her sleeves.

"Not for you."

Biting her bottom lip, she stared at the floor.

"All we want is for you to experience life, not survive it, like us." I lit a cigarette, "Pass, fail, party on yachts like Cecilia." Nudging her knee, so she would look up.

“All you’re here to do is have fun. Fuck it. If you aren’t enjoying it, come home, or travel overseas. Whatever you want, pea. Nik and I don’t care about grades.”

And she knows that. If she doesn’t, we might have bigger problems.

“You’re the best brother, you know that.”

My chest tightened. No. I was the reason she didn’t have a father.

She finally looked at me. “I failed my driver’s license.”

“Well, take it again.”

“I did. I’ve failed four times.Fourtimes.”

So, this is what the real problem was. Parenting was a mind game.

“Well, you won’t fail a fifth.”

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“I can’t do it. I can’t handle failing again.”

“If you do. Which you won’t. I’ve failed you. This one is on me, alright?”

How had this slipped through the cracks? I swore Nikolai had this covered.

Crossing her legs, she still didn’t look sure. “Maybe I don’t need a license. I’ll just use a driver.”

I pointed my cigarette at her, “Like fuck you will. My job is to make sure you are as independent as possible. You’re getting your license.”

“What if you have a heart attack?”

I paused. Right, I had forgotten Nik had his second heart attack after taking her on a lesson. So this was our fault.

“That won’t happen, pea. Nik’s heart attack and you learning to drive wasn’t connected.”

It might have had something to do with the rage he refuses to express.

“But how do you know that? Huh? Our whole family is dependent on you. We can’t risk you or Nik dying just so I can drive.”

The stories she tells herself.

“Trust me, if anyone is giving Nik a third heart attack, it is me,” I winked, “And I’m healthy, no heart problems. Nothing to worry about.”

“Are you sure about that?” she wiped her eyes. “you don’t look healthy.” Her concern made me uneasy.

“I just can’t sleep lately. It’s nothing.” I shrugged.

“Because of Maddy?”

Running my hand over my head. Deep down, I knew it was about everything changing.

“I always thought you two would end up together.” Sofia moved to the couch to sit beside me. “It is sort of hard to think she’s just gone.”

“She’s not dead Sofia. She’s getting married.” My stomach twisted, just saying death and Madeline in the same sentence.

“Sure, but she will eventually be gone. She will get busy with her in-laws, probably working with Noah expanding their business together and then maybe kids.”

I stared at her. I had forgotten how much Madeline had impacted their lives as well.

We got lucky she came into my life, at the same time as the girls were teenagers.

I pushed back against the couch. She was right. Madeline would eventually disappear from our lives and mine.

I couldn’t think of one way to get her out of that marriage without Damius finding out. I’d rather her with Noah than whatever sick fucked up plan my grandfather

would create to hurt her.

“Alright, bedtime. Big day tomorrow. I want to see if this driving is really heart attack worthy.”

“That’s not funny.”

“Sort of is.”

Nikolai's heart attack being caused by her driving. She gave herself way too much credit.

“Sofia, calm down.”

Stalling the car at a stop sign, she went into an immediate panic.

I also learned my sister struggles with left and right, because I said turn right. To keep her away from the traffic. She turned left. Probably just nerves. Fuck. I hoped it was just nerves.

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“I can’t. Can you please just take over?” She went to unclip her seatbelt.

“Listen to me, foot on that break. Start the car,”

The car horns started again.

“I can’t do this!”

Unclipping my seat belt. Getting out of the car. Pointing at the driver. “Do you have a problem?” walking to the back of the car. “Touch that horn one more fucking time. I dare you.”

Walking back to the car. “Alright, let's go again.” Closing the door. “Clutch to the ground,” putting her hand on the shifter, “First gear, alright, you're good both ways. Slowly accelerate.”

We started to move, crossing the road. “You’re doing great pea. Now, indicate and pull over.”

I took a few seconds after the car stopped. I had never needed a cigarette more in my life.

“Now, Sofia, I need you to be honest with me. Why are you insisting on learning a stick? I’m not saying you can’t, but I want to know why you’re focused on it.”

“Bastion said that automatics are not real cars.”

Did he just.

“Nealy, all of Bastion's fleet of cars are automatics. Fuck, he only drives stick when he wants to impress a girl.” How impressive that is, though, I’m not sure. “Is Bas the only reason you want to drive a stick?”

Tapping the stirring wheel, she sighed loudly, before turning to look at me. “I don’t want to be considered not a real driver.”

“I only drive automatics.”

“That’s not true.”

“Well, from today onwards I will.”

Rolling her eyes, she crossed her arms.

“Ignore Bas’s one-off comment. What do you want, pea? Either way, I’m teaching you.” Might just be here a lot longer if she insists on learning manual. Fuck. I’ll have to get Nik to handle those guys that were still waiting to be tortured.

The sooner we find out who is lacing our drugs. The easier my schedule will get. Though knowing my brothers, and my luck, something else would happen.

Solve one problem, three more normally followed.

Staring out the side window, she wouldn’t look at me. God, give me patience.

“Okay, fine. Let’s go again.”

Her hand hovered on the ignition. “Will you say something if Bas starts telling me

I'm not a real driver?"

"He won't, but if he does. Yes, I will remind him of the definition of driving."

The corner of her lips twitched up. "Promise?"

"You liked that silver SUV he has, right?" reaching for my phone to search for a car dealer. "Why don't we go buy one of them, and you can learn in that. If he says anything, you point out his daily isn't a real car."

"Can I keep it?"

"No point to a driver's license without a car."

Just like that, she was fine with the idea of driving an automatic.

Staring at my phone. When did I become scared of sending a message? Goddamn it. It's just dinner. We ate together all the time before. Sending the message to Madeline, I sat back on the couch. Pretending to listen to Sofia's long, detailed explanation of a television show.

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I reached for my phone as soon as it lit up. Rereading her reply.

Sorry, I can't.

Three words. Three fucking words. Seriously? None of those annoying little pictures, just three simple words. Even punctuation.

“Give me a min, pea.” I got up walking out of the room. If he had sent that message, I might just fly back tonight and cut off his thumb.

Putting the phone to my ear as I stepped outside.

“Hey,”

I froze. I did not expect her to answer straightaway. “Hey, um,” I ran my hand over my head, “just checking your, okay?”

Silence. The longest silence I had ever had with her. Each second was painful.

“Yeah, I'm fine.”

Three words again. She didn't sound fine.

“My love, are you lying to me?”

More silence. Fuck it. I was flying home. I would make it back before Sofia's test in the morning.

“Just tired. Um, I have to go. Night.”

She ended the call. Staring at the blank screen for a minute. Why did that hurt? Maybe I had been wrong. I wasn't losing her. I'd already lost her.

CHAPTER 13

Madeline

Standing out front of the building, the sirens grew louder. Someone must have reported it after seeing the flames.

I looked back at the burning building; the fire was now threatening to spread to the industrial complex next to it. That hadn't been my intention.

A car pulled to the curb abruptly.

I frowned, seeing the sports car. Nikolai only ever used a driver. Though it was late when I called him, looking at his casual clothes. I must have woken him.

“What happened?” He looked panicked as he walked around the car. “Maddy, are you okay?”

“I started a fire.” I looked back at it. “I didn't know it could spread so quickly, did you?” Maybe it was the chemicals that made it go up so fast.

He opened the passenger door. “Come on, we need to go.”

I nodded. Right. That was why I had called him. Getting in the car, he closed the door for me. The lights of the emergency services flashed in the distance. I felt bad that they were going to be spending their night putting it out.

I'd have to send something to the fire station tomorrow.

"Maddy, I need to know what happened?" Nikolai kept glancing at me.

Right. What had happened. I sighed.

"That wasn't my dad's first question when I walked in the door." I stared out the window, watching the blue and red lights get smaller. "He saw me, and said, what did I do?" I turned to look at Nik. "As if I had done something to warrant looking like this. And mom, told me to go back and apologize." I smoothed out my ripped dress; the blood would stain. "So, I did leave. I went back to his house and stole his car. Drove here and um..." I looked back in the side mirror. "Started that fire at the factory where they store their drugs."

I glanced at Nik. "But for it to go up so fast, I think they must have had a lab there too. What do you think?"

Normally, Nikolai always knows what to say, but right now, he was speechless.

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I suppose I did look rather frightening.

It was all superficial blood and cuts. That most likely would bruise, maybe scar.

That's what made it worse. I'd rather have internal bleeding than superficial injuries.

That I could at least hide from people. No one saw internal bleeding, or an organ healing.

I silently cried, glaring out the window.

But everyone could see this.

Everyone would see me weak.

I flinched as mom threw her dishes in the sink, leaving the room. Dad stared at her as she walked out for a second time.

I had never seen her carry a dish to the kitchen. I was surprised she even knew where the main kitchen was in the house.

“Are you sure about this?”

Lowering the ice from my jaw. “Am I sure about this? Are you serious Daddy? I've faced warlords who have more respect for me than him.”

And that said a lot. Respect in our world wasn't something I got easily.

Thanks to Nikolai, the Voss family was under the impression it wasn't me who had destroyed their drugs.

Even though I wanted to take credit. Nik insisted it would only complicate things.

But Noah would have to know it was me.

I had stolen his car and had left it there. I still wasn't sure how he explained that to his family.

“Everything I've planned is ruined just like that.” Mom walked back in, still furious. “Months of planning, months and months.”

It was almost like she couldn't see what he had done to me.

“I told you both when I agreed to the engagement. It was basically a trial. I will not spend my life with an angry man.”

Holding the ice back quickly. It still hurt to speak. Even the next day. The swelling was getting worse.

“Maddy, think of what people will say. What everyone will think.”

Slipping off the stool, “Great idea. Should I take some photos?” I would not let this be my life. Throwing the ice pack into the sink.

“Don't forget your involvement in this too, Maddy.” Mum yelled at my back.

“Right. I kneed him in the balls, when he wouldn't take no for an answer. Then he hit me. Repeatedly.”

“Had he been drinking?”

I turned to look at dad. “Is that an excuse?”

“No, but maybe it was a once off, an overreaction. He read the situation wrong.”
Mom added. Still so desperate about this wedding.

“If he can hit me drunk, he can hit me sober. Regardless, there is no excuse.”

I twirled my hair up; I would not cover these bruises.

“I’m not marrying him,” straightening my shoulders back. “Sorry, but the wedding is over. And Daddy,” I pointed my finger at him. “You tell Noah Voss that he will be paying for any cosmetic surgery I need if this ends up scarring.”

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Unbelievable. Mom was acting like she didn't enjoy every second of planning that wedding. She will love the challenge of planning a new one.

I would have to ignore her snide remarks until the next merger was announced.

I should not have taken the ice off.

My face looked terrible. Swollen. Bruised. The cut was shocking. I couldn't stop crying as I looked in the mirror. He ruined my face. I couldn't leave the house like this.

Day three and I looked worse.

My phone buzzed on the bathroom vanity.

Vince.

The corner of my lips twitched up, which caused immediate pain. Sulking, I walked back into the bedroom. I couldn't tell him.

Nikolai said it would be better if he told Vince what had happened. Considering that I accidentally burned down one of their developments next door to the factory. I agreed. Plus, I really owed Nik for that night.

Staring at his message, asking me out for dinner this weekend. It would just be too complicated to see him right now.

Writing back, sorry I can't.

I sat back on the bed. Shopping. That would help. I was donating everything Noah's ego had bought me. And everything I've worn while with him.

Frowning. Vince was calling me.

"Hey," I answered, immediate pain spread across my face. I needed to master talking without moving every muscle.

"Hey, um," he paused, "just checking your, okay?"

Immediate tears. Hearing genuine concern in his voice. Biting my tongue. "Yeah, I'm fine."

I hated lying to him.

I covered my mouth with my hand, trying to muffle my crying.

"My love, are you lying to me?"

My tears become uncontrollable. Holding the phone away from me for a moment. I can't do it. I can't lie to him. Why did I even answer? Steadying my breathing.

My tears burning me, as they ran down over the cut.

"Just tired. Um, I have to go. Night."

"I thought you couldn't come," Noah hissed, "And I know it was you who burned down our factory."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I shrugged. “And no, I said I wouldn’t come with you. At no point did I say I wasn’t attending your grandparents’ anniversary. I won’t be accused of being rude.” I smiled at his cousins, waving, who kept glancing at me. “Oh, there they are.”

Walking from him, straight to his very strict and traditional grandmother.

“Madeline.” She opened her arms and her eyes focusing on my very deeply bruised and swollen face. Hugging her, I pulled back. What a shock. Noah is here ready to do damage control.

“I just wanted to formally apologize for backing out of the merger. At the last minute.” Placing the empty glass of champagne on a waiter’s tray as they walked past. “But I couldn’t be with a man that doesn’t understand the word no. I’m sure you understand.”

She nodded, looking between us.

“Congratulations on fifty years, with Evan,” I touched her hand, turning to look at Noah. “God help the woman you marry.”

Walking away, ignoring the glare of his parents. God forbid someone embarrasses their perfect prick of a son.

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The sun was blinding as I stepped outside, quickly putting my sunglasses on before walking to the SUV.

“Maddy, wait.”

Oh my god.

Glancing at Noah as he stepped in my way. “You haven’t told that psycho Crow brother about this, right?” he forced a weak smile, looking pale. “Right?”

He did not just say that.

“Don’t call my best friend a psycho!”

“Maddy, you do know he is a fucking serial killer, right? The madman for their family.”

I won’t listen to this. Noah had no issues baiting him when he thought there were no consequences.

Ignoring his question, I got into the car. The bodyguard closed the door for me.

Did I know? What a joke.

For God’s sake. I am always restocking his wardrobe. If only Vince could learn to torture and not get it all over his shirt every time. And the number of odd suits I donate every month, because the jacket is gone, or the pants. Never both, just one.

That was the real crime, all those beautifully designed suits that end up unpaired.

CHAPTER 14

Vince

I needed to start my breathing exercises again. Dropping the glass bottle. What a fucking mess. “Alright, next one.” Stepping over the limp, bloody body, walking out of the cell room.

They always want to waste my fucking time and be difficult. For once, I would like to ask a question, get an answer without having to break their very weak loyalty.

Reaching for my phone. Nikolai. Probably wondering if I was back.

“I’m busy brother, I’ll call you back.”

“It will have to wait. I’m out the front.”

It wasn’t just what he said, it was his tone. Walking up the hall of the cellar. “And what is suddenly so important?” typing in the code for the door before stepping outside. Sure enough, he was here.

Ending the call, I walked to the black SUV and opened the back door. “What is this all about?”

“Did Sofia pass her test?” He looked at me, putting his phone down.

Why couldn’t he have asked me that on the phone? “Yeah, she did.”

“I’ll call her later.”

“She’s going to ask you for a convertible. It’s a no. First few years, I want as much metal around her as possible.”

“Agreed. Come on, we’ve got a lunch.”

He could not be fucking serious. “Do you see me right now?”

He nodded. “It’s not that noticeable. Clean your hands and face on the way.”

It was good to know that the sight of me covered in blood didn’t affect his appetite.

“I’m not hungry. Nikolai, I’m busy.” That look in his eyes. Fine. Fuck it. No worries. I’ll just stop mid torture to attend a lunch date with my needy brother. Getting in the car, slamming the door. “Fine. Let’s go. Not as if my time schedule matters to you.”

“You don’t have a time schedule.”

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I scoffed, “Obviously, not one I can keep with my siblings.”

Every day, every single day, one of them needs me. I’ve already had a call from Rome, who I have to meet in two hours. But why bother explaining that to Nikolai. No. The man is hungry and I’m suddenly his lunch bitch.

I’m going to kill him. He said lunch. Not a lunch function with other people. Glaring at his back, walking behind him.

Whose fucking wedding anniversary is this, and why did I have to be here? Practicing my breathing exercises before I throw him through that obnoxiously large cake.

He must have woken up this morning and thought, how can I make Vince suffer? Oh. Great idea. I’ll drag him to some old fuckers’ wedding anniversary.

Wait. That sign said Voss.

Only now did I notice how silent the room went as Nikolai walked towards a table. Looking around at the guests. Are we crashing this wedding anniversary?

Every muscle in my body went tight, as I saw Noah Voss at the table Nikolai had stopped at.

If he brought me here to make some fake peace or a gesture of respect. I might just end up hurting my brother. Throwing him through the cake would be less painful.

“Nikolai Crow,” Noah’s father, Chris stood up, “What do we owe this unexpected

visit?”

Glaring at my brother's back. He better not ask me to shake that fucker's hand, because I'd break it.

The room was silent. Everyone staring at us. I hated people. Even more so when I could feel their attention.

“I just need a moment with your son, Chris. I'm sure you understand why.” Nikolai looked down at the table. Noah got out of his chair while I kept my focus on Nikolai.

One wrong look from Noah: I could end up strangling him. Though, if this was his family event. I looked at the empty seat beside him. Madeline mustn't have attended.

“Lay down on the ground.” Nikolai kept his hands in his pocket.

I was confused as I watched Noah listen.

Nikolai applied his foot to his throat. I had clearly missed something. He stomped repeatedly on his neck with enough pressure to fracture his voice box.

My smile got bigger when he started coughing up blood. With enough luck, he might drown on it.

Even as Nikolai walked away, not one of his family members risked getting out of their seats.

It was a glorious sight to see that man in so much fucking pain.

“Wait until he fully recovers,” Nik stood at my side, “then you can kill him.”

My grin got bigger, watching him choke, struggling to breathe. Fuck. I hoped he didn't end up drowning now.

Walking backwards a few steps before turning around to walk beside Nik. I grabbed his shoulder, pulling him to my side. "So how about that lunch, brother?"

CHAPTER 15

Madeline

Holding back my groan after a knock on the bedroom door. What are the chances she has now found a night exercise class to add to my daily routine?

I pushed the blankets off. My legs were aching from this morning's class.

If only I had known the chef now lodges and reports back every item I ate from the kitchen.

My stomach twisted again. Reliving the shame from last night when Mom read out a week's worth of calories just before dinner. I had never agreed to a fluid diet quicker.

Each day for seven days I made it to two thousand, when her rule is nine hundred.

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Another knock.

I took a deep breath. I couldn't think of an excuse not to go, other than my legs hurt. No way would she accept that.

Hopefully, it's just the kitchen staff with the broth for dinner.

Unlocking the bedroom door.

My whole body relaxes immediately.

Vince.

I opened the door wider and stepped back to let him in. God, I had missed him.

Nikolai must have told him, by his cold, unreadable expression. Before he could say a word, I stepped forward, leaning into him.

He sighed, hugging me back.

"I missed you," I pulled back to look at him. "How have you been? Are you sleeping again?"

He gently brushed my hair back, looking at me too intently. I pulled away from him.

"I know it's bad, okay? I told dad, Noah will be paying if I need cosmetic surgery." Though, I'd probably pay for it myself, so I never had to see that man again.

Instead of letting me out of his grip, he held my waist, pulling me back to him. Right now, I couldn't read what he was thinking, and it sort of scared me.

“Um Vince, you're kind of scaring me being this quiet.”

He kissed the side of my face, “Sorry,”

At least he wasn't mad at me. Another knock on the door. I stepped out of his embrace and opened it. Thank God it was just dinner. Taking the tray off the waiter and stepping back. Vince closed the door for me.

“Why even bring a tray? It's one bowl. Hell. Why couldn't they just give me a cup?” I took the bowl off the stupid tray and put it on the bedside table.

I jumped, startled, as Vince wrapped his arm around my waist. Touching his arm, before he took my reaction the wrong way.

“Sorry, it's not you.” I turned around, “Are you okay?” he was rather pale.

“Come home with me?” he gently touched the side of my head. “Please.”

“Okay, after I have this.”

His hand tightened on my waist. “Flavored warm water?”

I nodded, smiling. “I probably can get a cup and take it with me.” actually, that was a really good idea. I'd do that.

I was about to step away from him again when he pulled me back to his chest. Hugging me tighter.

For the first time in months, I felt relaxed. Finally, feeling safe again.

CHAPTER 16

Vince

“My strongest Crow,” Damius tapped the edge of the knife on the desk, staring at me.

“Is responsible for creating three of the weakest to carry our name.”

At a young age, I had learned, giving him any reaction only fed him.

“I gave you those boys, expecting you to mold crows. Not to create three low-level thugs.”

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“You didn’t give them to us.” I kept my hands in my pockets, meeting his cold stare.
“We made a deal.”

He got me. He fucking broke me. And in exchange, Nikolai and I got our siblings.

“And as I said, we handled it.”

“You.” He pointed at me. “You handled it. My Crow handled their fucking mistake.”
He threw the knife across the room, it only just missing the portrait of my father.

He wanted me to bite back. To fight. Instead, I stayed calm. I raised men, not broken boys. I stood by mine and Nikolai's decision.

“I have asked Bastion to join us.” he stepped away from the desk, and there were few things that would get a reaction out of me. But threatening them was definitely one.

“Damius, as you said, they are my crows, my responsibility. So, I’ll take the consequences.”

His eyes lit up, and that’s when I realized I had fucked up.

“But Vincent, hurting them, hurts you more. Consequences for both. Sounds fair, does it not?”

It took everything inside of me to control my reaction.

“Would any of the crows you made last in the basements? Because every crow I

made did.” He stepped forward, ready for a challenge. “What did I always tell you? Your weaknesses are my opportunities.”

I slowly nodded. “I remember the all the vows, Damius. So, what shall it be, then?”

That sick, twisted look in his eyes.

I took a step forward, “But my right is to take both punishments. According to the oath, correct?”

“And if I’m to punish all three of them? Then what?”

I shrugged. I highly doubted there was something he could think of I hadn’t endured.

His cold stare slowly turned into a smile. “Always my strongest.” Laughing, he hit my back, “Come, the rest of my crows are waiting.”

I followed behind him. There wasn’t anything I hated more than the formal sit down with my cousins every second month. Over thirty of us waiting to be scolded. Nine out of ten times, it was my family he targeted. Unless one of the others really fucks up.

Then if by some miracle he doesn’t target a member of my family.

He targets Villain. Somehow finding a way my city has disappointed him. Considering our trade was down because of the laced drugs. Three buildings went up in a fire. And there was that massive fuck up with Roman and the guns.

It would take something serious to not have his full focus for tonight.

This whole meeting I enjoyed Damius ripping shreds off Jamison and Marcel.

Nearly starting a war. Honestly, it was just a bonus that Madeline's cousins were the ones to make them look bad.

“Like you said, grandfather. The actions were careless. So careless it looks staged.” Jamison was glaring at me.

“Is there a reason you're looking at me, Jamison?” I turned my chair to look down the table at him.

“Perhaps I just want answers.” He shrugged, staring at me.

“Answers to what exactly?” Tapping my finger on the table as I looked from him to Marcel. “Are you two trying to say that this giant fucked up mess is somehow our fault?”

“Your fault. To be exact.” Marcel glared. “Do we look stupid, Vincent? The attack was so staged, you might as well of signed your name with blood at the scene.”

“Lacking accountability, don't we have a vow about that, Damius?” I asked, not taking my eyes off them. “A Crow is as weak as the mistakes he fails to admit.”

Marcel hit the table. “Don't you fucking sit there, baiting us, when we know it was you.”

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“I flew to your territory to blow up the Thorne’s shipment yards, all to create a supply and demand problem that you would benefit from?”

“It’s not about the money. It’s about that bitch that used to be glued to your side!”

Holding my reaction. I could feel Damius watching me.

“And last week when Jamison held a gun to Felix Thorne, was that me, too?”

“You fucking?—”

“Enough.” Damius spoke to him. “It is best for both of you to remain silent while I have some respect remaining.” As he stood up, “I have spoken with the Thornes. Seeing the significant damage to both sides is impossible to forgive and forget. We have decided a family merger is the best option.”

Family merger.

Pure white panic runs through me. Their family only has one person not married.

It took all my effort not to break the fucking armrests.

“Considering the bad blood is in your territory, Marcel. I am suggesting Oliver or August.”

Marcel's lips curve up, still staring at me. “August.”

Her marrying into another family was nearly impossible to live with. Her marrying one of my cousins. I couldn't survive that.

“No. She's mine.” I lifted my cold stare from Marcel to Damius. “If that is a problem. August and I can take it outside.” Not even giving that fucker the respect of being looked at as I challenge him.

Twice I had seen my grandfather surprised. The first when I admitted to killing my father, and now.

“Vincent, you once said you'd never marry or take another oath for this family.”

My weaknesses were his opportunities.

I tried to think of the right way to not spike his interest in her. But fuck it, what life or sanity would I have if she married my cousin?

“She will marry me, even if I have to step over a dead body on the day.”

Silence.

The type that is normally followed by pain or, in our family, a bullet. Threatening death to another family member is punishable. Considering the look in Marcel's eyes, he was waiting for Damius's command.

Instead, like a madman, Damius started laughing.

Sick. Twisted. Bastard.

“What do I always say, my strongest Crow.” He grabbed my shoulders. “No threats, promises.” Walking around me, down the length of the table.

“Now these accusations, Marcel,” Damius stood across from him, behind Bastion.

I shifted on my chair, ready to get involved if he touched him. Nikolai seemed to have the same idea.

“You were correct when we looked closer at Vincent's location. He wasn't in town the day of the shipment fire occurred.”

What the fuck.

“When traced, and location thoroughly checked. Vincent was found to be with Sofia.” He tapped Bastion's shoulders. “Like a good brother, or some may say, father.” Letting go of him, he walked past Luca. “Now your location wasn't to be found, Marcel, and Oliver.” Damius slowly eyed them. “A pattern of large gaps where no location data can be found, even on yourself, Jamison.” He clicked his tongue. “So, shall I keep digging to find out why?”

None of us were stupid enough to think he didn't know.

“No grandfather.” Marcel turned to look at me. “We accept accountability for these...unfortunate events.”

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“Very well,” Damius stood at the end of the table. “Vincent is to take the oath with the Thorne girl. This matter won’t be spoken about again. Now,” he clapped his hands, the side doors opened. “We shall celebrate, Marcells announcement on my first great grandson, to be named in my honor.”

Too bad if they didn’t want to name their kid after him. Damius the fourth. Fuck that for a first name.

I shared a look with Nikolai as the drinks started to be poured.

I had never needed a drink more. How was I going to explain to Madeline she didn’t have a choice about marrying into our sick fucked up family?

The car ride back with Nikolai was silent. Every possible way I thought of telling her seemed to just not be right.

The only choice I could give her was me or August.

My stomach twisted. What if she wanted to marry August?

“I blew up the Thornes yard.”

What the fuck.

I turned to look at Nikolai. Who had been silent for the last two and a half hours on the drive home.

“So, under no fucking circumstances are you to let Maddy marry August, understand? She doesn’t get a choice between you and him. It’s just you.” He turned to look at me. “I didn’t carefully plan, start a war, keep all our hands clean, for you to fuck up my plan at the end. Then for us all to end up in a worse position.”

He started their war. So Marcel was right. Knowing they really hadn’t been responsible infuriated me more.

“Clearly you’re not very fucking busy.” I shook my head. While I was carrying this family, mister arson was flying up the coast starting wars. “When did you put all this in motion?”

“That night at the club, when I found you in the hall.” He checked his watch. “Honestly, you’re unbearable without her. I forgot how bad you could get.”

“Unbearable?”

“Worse than when you were sleep deprived because of the twins.” He shook his head, “and I’m not letting you slip back to how bad you were at twenty-five. Just before you met her. I nearly lost you.”

Gritting my teeth.

The car stopped at his front door.

“Her engagement falling apart just before it made it easier. I had already organized a hit on Noah.” He opened the car door. “Maddy belongs with you and our family, so don’t fuck this up. Understand? She doesn’t have a choice. Do I need to be the bad guy and be the one that tells her?”

Not getting out of the car, he waited for my answer.

The bastard waited until the last possible moment to tell me on the drive home.

“Vince, do I need to tell her?”

Shifting on the seat. “No. I’ll handle it.”

“Good.” He got out, closing the door.

CHAPTER 17

Madeline

I laid back against Vince. “You put them back on.” Holding his fingers, I traced across his rings.

“Yeah, a few minutes after you took them off.” He linked his hand with mine, slowly stroking my thumb. “You were too distracted to notice.”

I sighed. Now I had all that to look forward to again. The indecision, the questions, the overthinking.

It didn’t help my parents had been acting weird all week. I even saw my mother smile at dad. Which just wasn’t normal. Ever.

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I looked back at the night sky. The stars were so much brighter, away from the city.

“Are you cold?” He asked, running his hand along my thigh. “You feel cold.”

“I’m fine.”

For four years, I had known him, and I still didn’t understand why he wanted to touch me. It was probably pathetic how much I loved it.

“I’ve missed this.” I held his hand to my chest, laying back into him.

“My life’s a lot harder to live without you in it.” He moved my hair back to the other side. “I want to ask you something. Promise me you won’t make a decision tonight, and you’ll think about it?”

He wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me back to him tighter.

“Okay,”

“Will you consider letting me spend the rest of my life with you?” He kissed the side of my head, “Please Madeline. Would you consider marrying me?”

My heart beats faster, drowning out every other sound.

“Don’t answer me now, just think about it?”

Resting back against him, I nodded.

Waking up the next morning, Vince had left to go handle something in town. By the amount of swearing and yelling while he was on the phone, I could bet his shirt would be missing when he got back.

His question from last night had been on repeat, consuming my mind.

I had made it halfway to Nikolais before I regretted not driving to his house.

Sometimes I forget just how far away all the houses are from each other. And it wasn't until he let me in, did I even consider he mightn't have been home.

"Are you sure you aren't busy Nik?" I asked again, following behind him into the open lounge.

I was just hoping he would say yes so I could get out of asking.

"For you Maddy, I always have time." He smiled, "We've missed you."

That was sweet. Though, Nikolai always knows what to say.

"Are you okay?" he stared at my bruised face.

I couldn't stop the smile. "Yeah, I am." I looked at a large mountain of paperwork beside the fire. "What is all this?"

"Evidence that someone thought to keep on us."

Because that worked out well for everyone else that turned on the Crows. Going up against a generational global conglomerate like theirs is a death wish.

He sighed, tossing more paperwork in the fire. "Did Vince talk to you yesterday?"

My stomach tightened. So, it was an official merger. That answered the question on if he was serious.

Sighing, I nodded, watching the fire. “He told me to think about it.” I handed Nik another stack of paper. “But I’m not sure if it is fair to him.”

“Have you ever seen a glass shatter? All the small pieces?”

I frowned. What an odd question. “Yes, why?”

“That’s Vince, after our grandfather was finished with him.” He looked away from me. “Life has only been unfair to him. I’d forgotten how he could get before you. The last few months, was a refreshing reminder.”

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“He never wanted to get married. For as long as I’ve known him, it has been the one thing that has never changed. He never wanted to take another oath for the family.”

Nikolai stepped back from the fire. “Do you want a drink?”

I shook my head. It wasn’t what he asked, it was how he asked it. “Nik, just tell me whatever it is. I don’t need a drink before hearing it.”

“Damius is insisting you marry into the family. Your family agreed, so,” he gave me a side way look. “If you don’t marry Vince, you will be marrying one of our cousins.”

My family had agreed. All that speech about choice. “Because of Nathaniel and Marcel.”

“We can both agree that if you marry one of our cousins, it would eventually kill him.”

A life oath to one of his cousins. Suddenly I felt nauseated.

“Does my family know that there is a choice at the moment?” I can’t believe I have to ask Nik.

“No. Like I said earlier, life has only been unfair to Vince.”

Madeline

“My beautiful granddaughter, what is this I hear you ended your engagement?”

“We just wouldn’t work well together. I’m sorry, grandma.” Noah Voss was a pig. But the family wanted to stay associated with them.

At least I got some satisfaction knowing he was in hospital recovering from throat surgery. His family had been very secretive about what had happened to him.

“Well, don’t you dare settle. Your father settled.” She shook her head. “Not one son. Your Aunty Diana was first proposed to your father, but no, he went with your mother. Two sons she gave your uncle.” My grandmother clicked her tongue. “My daughter refused to listen to me during her pregnancy and look how it ended. One girl and a removed uterus.” She tapped my hand, “Your poor father.”

“Do you need anything else, grandma? I’m just going to check on mom.” I placed her cup of tea beside her.

She scoffed, “So you should. That’s her seventh drink. I have been counting. Only depressed people drink as much as your mother.” casting a look in my mother’s direction. “And I saw what she ate at dinner.”

God. Family events were exhausting. Walking across the room over to mom and aunty Diana.

Mom sighed, staring at my cousins. “Such a great moment for the family. You must be so proud, Diana.”

I fought to be seen. My cousins just had to stand in a room.

“Maddy, do you need that? It is a waste of calories. If you need alcohol, have a shot.” She shook her head. “It has only been weeks since the cancellation of the wedding and she is already letting herself go.”

“Oh, we did hear about that. Noah is marrying Rhiannon now.”

Mom sighed. “She will make a beautiful bride.”

“So why was the merger canceled?” Aunty Diana asked, a flicker of disappointment in her eyes. God forbid I hurt her son’s expansion plans.

“Maddy refused to step away from the business. Even though the boys can clearly handle it.” She gestured at my cousins. “All that planning wasted. Well, Rihanna won’t need a sunset wedding. That woman doesn’t need shadows to help hide anything.”

“Mom, do you need another drink? I’m going to check on dad.”

Mom shooed my hand away. “No, dear, I’m fine. Gosh, you might not care about your figure, but I’m not losing mine.”

I nodded, walking towards dad at the bar. Tonight was hard on him. He was the eldest. That territory should be going to his sons. Sadly for him, he only had me.

Touching his shoulder, as I leaned against the bar beside him.

“Maddy.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

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“Have you eaten?” I asked, looking at the whiskey in his hand. “You shouldn’t drink on an empty stomach, daddy. You’ll regret it in the morning.”

He nodded, only for his eyes to drift from my grandfather to mom. Back to his whiskey.

“One more regret on the list won’t matter.” He stared down at the glass. “Can I ask you a favor? Can you go easy on your mother? She’s not coping with the wedding being called off.” He loosened his tie. “Something about you purposely wanting to ruin everything that makes her happy.”

They had been arguing a lot more lately. That smile I saw her give him was definitely a once off.

It took all my self control to not point out that they already had my next wedding planned. A two-hour flight here, and still no one has mentioned merging with the crows.

I nodded. “Well, Nate seems to be adjusting already to his new role.” I changed the subject, gesturing to my cousin.

“Controlling an operation like ours needs strength. Power. Being taken seriously. He is a good fit.”

Not strong enough. Not serious enough. Not pretty enough. Not thin enough. Not enough.

“I’m going to get you something to eat from the kitchen.” I touched his hand before walking through the crowd. Cutting through the dining room, holding back tears before I made it to the side bathroom.

Breathing in sharply. My uncles got sons; my parents got cursed with me.

Closing the door, I turned the lock. God, I couldn’t afford to ruin my makeup. Composing myself before walking back out.

“Maddy!” Nate spotted me from across the room.

“Congratulations Nate.”

He gestured to the side. “Can we talk for a minute?”

“Fine, but if it is fashion advice, you know where I stand on the topic of brown suits.”

He grinned as we walked outside. “How is Uncle Marc taking it?”

I shrugged. Everything he controlled will one day be Nathaniel’s. His legacy ended with him. How would anyone feel?

“I think he wishes he had a son.” Running my fingers through my hair. “Don’t worry about him. You’re the right choice for the family.”

The look in his eyes really made me uncomfortable. I hated pity.

“Nate,” I held his hand. “It’s okay. If I wanted pity, I’d play up the broken engagement.”

“Well, your role doesn’t change, you know that?”

“I know.” every day, I will fight to be respected and worthy of just being in the same room as men.

“And fuck Voss.”

I scrunched my nose up. “One of the reasons it ended. That’s why you wanted to talk to me, right? About the next merger?”

Or should I say the next merger that his actions have caused? Perhaps I had made the wrong choice in joining the family. I could have stepped aside, never had the pressure of trying to impress dad.

“Are you aware of the issues we are having with the Crows?”

Issues he was having with the Crows. Back home, there were no problems

I nodded, staring at my father drinking at the bar.

“A merger between our family and theirs is likely to happen.”

“Considering I’m the only one left unmarried, that means me?”

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To think I've had to deal with the backlash from the last one ending, all while they planned this one behind my back.

He nodded. "One good thing. It's one of the crows from up here. Just think, you can finally move here. You've always loved the ocean."

No. I hated the ocean. Saltwater dries my skin. I always loved bikinis and the sun.

That same feeling of betrayal goes through me.

All these years, I proved to them I was capable of more. But in the end, this is what my family saw my real role as.

"Darling, you're gorgeous, but not the level of beautiful to warrant a ring like this."
Mom stared at my phone.

I should have known better than to look at jewelry near her. But what were the chances she would see my phone, let alone take it from me?

"Anyway, the family chooses the ring, isn't that right Marco?" Mom looked down the table at dad.

He nodded.

I wouldn't be falling for that again. I've already had one ring I hated. I would not let that happen a second time.

“I’m buying my own ring.”

“You can’t do that.” Mom placed my phone down. “Marco, tell her she can’t do that. How insulting to the Crows.”

“Massie!” Dad snapped.

“Oh. Sorry. Haven’t you told her?” Mom looked at dad rather smugly.

“It’s fine, I know. Nate told me last night.” So, my suspicions were right. They all knew but me.

“Well, of all families, you can’t insult the Crows.”

“I’m sure Vince won’t care if I buy my own ring.”

“It’s not Vincent, you are marrying Maddy,” Mom shook her head. “Marco, what is his name again?”

“Yes, it was to be one of his cousins. But Vince is taking his place, so,” I took my phone back. “He is the one I am marrying. And he won’t care if I get my own ring.”

Staring at the custom designed mockups that had come back from the jeweler.

The silence was awkward. The sooner we head home, the better. I’m starting to remember why our family has such a big house for three people.

“Morning Uncle Zeke.” I locked my phone.

He pulled a chair out next to me. Mom got up and left. Followed seconds later by dad. Both going in opposite directions.

“Don’t take it personally. I just upset them both.” I crossed my legs, turning to face him.

“What did they do?” he reached for a bagel off the table. It was nice having one family member who didn’t always think it was my fault.

“The merger with the Crows.”

“What merger?” Uncle Zeke looked at me, confused.

“Nate told me last night, but between us, I knew. Vince told me before I left.”

“Maddy, what are you talking about?”

“Me marrying into the Crows. To settle down the tension that started up here.”

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“When the fuck was this organized?”

Taken aback by his sudden outburst. “I don’t know.”

“So you’re marrying into that psycho family because Nathaniel fucked up?”

All this time, I thought the family only kept me in the dark about this. Nathaniel was Zeke’s son. This was their operation. How could he not know about this merger?

“The crows aren’t that bad, well,” I paused, “the ones I know I like.”

“Did Nathaniel and Marco organize this? Or are Felix and Cole involved, too?”

I shrugged.

Zeke pushed his seat back, getting up. “I’ll tell them it’s not happening.”

“Don’t. It will just cause a fight.”

“No, Marco isn’t?—”

“I’m not what?” Dad’s words were cold as he walked back into the room. Glaring at uncle Zeke. “Come on then, spit it out Ezekiel. What is it I’m not doing?”

The death glare between these two was ridiculous. I could groan. All because I was looking at engagement rings.

“Madeline is fulfilling her role in this family. Her duty.” Dad flickered a look at me.

His words might be said out of anger, but it was the tone that told me he meant it. Still, after everything I did for this family. My real role was to marry into another.

“Apologize to her now,” Uncle Zeke walked around the table.

“Or what? She is my daughter, and that is her role.” Dad shoved Zeke back. “Unless you have something you want to say, Ezekiel? Even your son saw the bigger picture.”

“Plotted this with fucking Nate, did you?” he shoved dad back. “What a shock.”

After last time, I knew better than to get in between them.

“Stop it, please.” I pushed the chair back and got up. “I’m happy with the decision, Uncle Zeke. So, it’s fine.”

“It is not Maddy, they are using you as a pawn.”

“A pawn!” dad scoffed. “It’s her role, her duty. The one fucking thing she is actually meant to be doing for our family!”

Not even two seconds passed before they were throwing punches at each other. Glass shattering as Uncle Zeke threw dad into the cupboard.

Nate and finally Uncle Cole came in, separating them.

Like normal, I’m frozen. Everything starts to go distant. My heart is racing as they keep shouting at each other. Uncle Zeke turned on Nate, blaming him for this. As the fight continued. I zoned out.

Vaguely remembering the plates and dishes that started flying around the room, as I sat back down.

CHAPTER 19

Vince

“He fucking ran, Nikolai; what did you want me to do?” I yelled, coming to a stop at the traffic lights.

“To not use a shotgun Vince, repeatedly. Pretty simple.”

Gripping the steering wheel tighter. “Here is a better idea, brother. Next time you tie someone to a chair, check the fucking knot. Instead of expecting me to fix your fucking mistakes.”

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“Do you know the cleanup we have now? Just because you’re in a mood.”

Pulling my cigarette packet out of my pocket.

“A mood you caused. Ten flights of stairs, across eight industrial blocks. That’s how far I chased that weedy looking lizard on crack. I didn’t even see your ass get off the top floor.”

Empty. Why would I carry around an empty cigarette packet? This bloody family. I ended the call.

Immediately I was fighting the urge to check my phone, to see if Madeline had messaged me.

Over a week of silence. At first, I didn’t want to entrap her into a marriage, and now all I could think about was what if she said no.

The thought of her picking my cousin twisted my stomach.

How the fuck could I be out of cigarettes? A call started to go through the car. Answering it, I leaned across, checking the compartment.

“What the fuck do you want?”

Empty. Great. Slamming the compartment shut.

“I said, what the fuck do you want?”

I overtook a car at the traffic lights, that didn't understand green meant to go. Swerving across the road, I turned into a petrol station. Ending the call and getting out.

Carrying an empty cigarette packet around. That's how much sanity I have left. At this rate, Nikolai is driving me to have a heart attack before I can cause him another one. Paying for the cigarettes.

I was ignoring the dirty glares from an old lady as I lit up next to the petrol bowser.

One inhale before my phone was ringing again. Which one is it now? Rome.

“What?”

“The late-night delivery just came in, we're short half.”

Closing my eyes. It was going to be one of those nights.

Reaching for my phone, I scrolled back through the numbers to call Luca. After nearly drowning two men in olive oil for him. Pausing when I saw Madeline's name. I hadn't spoken to her tonight. I'd remember, because it was the night from hell.

Incoming call, looking at the time.

A rush of white panic went through me. No. My luck can't be that bad.

I had yelled at her twice and then ended the call.

My chest tightened. Surely, she would have known. I didn't realize it was her.

Fuck.

What if I had upset her?

I checked the time: twenty past five in the morning. Fuck it. I called her, putting the phone to my ear. Only it went straight to voicemail.

Unbuttoning my wet shirt before peeling it off. At least the T-shirt was dry. I tossed it to the side, driving to her house. Give it a few hours or so, and I could knock on the door and apologize to her.

I had only waited an hour; every worse possible scenario had gone through my head.

When my luck changed. Three black sedans pulled into her driveway. Knowing damn well that the middle car only drove Madeline around.

I sat on the edge of her bed. After letting myself into her room.

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Right now. I felt twenty-nine going on sixty. Meanwhile, miss little twenty-three had already done an exercise class and was back showering.

Dropping my head to my hands. What if she didn't believe me? What if she said no. Why did the thought of her saying no hurt me?

“Long night?”

Moving my hands.

Why did I need her so badly, but she didn't need me? Seeing her with Noah ripped me apart. I couldn't even explain it. Now, it could all happen again, but worse, with my cousin.

She stood in front of me, frowning.

“Have you slept at all?” She touched my cheek.

Holding her hips, I pulled her to me. “I'm so sorry. I didn't?—”

“Stop, I know.” She cut me off, still looking at me with annoyance. “When will you start taking care of yourself?” Pouting, she pushed me back, holding the towel up, before climbing over me. “I'm serious Vince. I hate this new habit. It has to stop.”

I held her face, gently tracing my thumb under the faded bruise. The satisfaction of knowing Noah Voss will have no hands after he recovered from his throat surgery.

And all the ways I still had to make him suffer. I realized death would be an easy option. I'd rather have him live with consequences.

“Wait here,” she climbed off.

“Where are you going?”

“Getting dressed, and coming home with you. I'm going to make sure you sleep.”

If last night was what I had to experience to get her back home, I'd do it again.

CHAPTER 20

Madeline

Getting up off the lounge when I heard the front door open.

“Vince!?” Bastion slammed the front door. “Yeah, I'm here. I'll call you back.”

Had he lost his mind? Who comes into someone else's house, slamming doors and shouting. Picking up a heel, I hurled it at him.

Cursing, he turned, holding the side of his arm.

“Shush!”

This was the reason Vince didn't sleep. Every two minutes, one of them needed him. My poor heel. Walking beside him to pick it up. I pointed down to the lounge.

Why was he grinning like that? I shoved his side when he went to speak again.

“Thank fuck. Are you two back together?” Bas asked when I slid the doors closed.

“We were never together.” I rubbed the scratch on the heel. Ruined. Why couldn’t I have thrown something else at him.

“Fine, whatever you two call it. But you’re back, yeah?”

Biting my lip, I sat back down on the couch. “Maybe.”

“Maybe? What do we have to do to get you back to putting up with his bullshit? Seriously Maddy, name it.”

Rolling my eyes, “He is not that bad Bastion. You’re so dramatic.”

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He sat across from me. Well, it was his fault my heel was ruined.

“Didn’t you hear I’m engaged?”

His expression fell. “What?”

“Yep.”

His phone started ringing. “Hold on a sec, it's Luca. He’s freaking out over Vince disappearing.” he answered it. “Yeah, he is fine, asleep, I’m guessing. Maddy is here.” He continued to stare at me. “No, they aren’t back together.”

Why did people keep assuming that?

He scoffed, agreeing to something Luca said before ending the call.

“Seriously Maddy, is there anything I can say to change your mind, get you to marry my brother instead?”

The double doors slid open. Vince. He looked sick.

“Great. Are you happy now Bastion? You’ve woken him up.” I know he is all against locking his family out, but he needed to reconsider using the locks.

Bastion actually looked guilty, standing up. “Sorry, Luca was freaking out, that you died and something about oil.”

Vince nodded, seeming to understand, but was staring at me. That distant broken look back in his eyes.

“I’ll, um, leave you two to it.” He whacked Vince's shoulder, walking past. Maybe I could just start locking the front door without him knowing.

“Go back to bed.” Getting off the couch, after hearing the front door close.

He didn’t move. What was going through his head? He looked physically sick.

“I probably need to handle that with Luca.” He muttered, turning, and walking away from me.

Checking the time, not even an hour sleep, and he thought that was acceptable. Sometimes, it was hard to believe he wasn’t doing this on purpose to hurt himself.

Listening to him walk up the stairs.

Fine. If he wants to be difficult.

Grabbing my phone, I walked to his room. Thinking of all the ways I could threaten him. Closing his door, he looked up. Sitting on the edge of the bed.

Oh, the irony. Different bed. Same broken Vince.

“I told you earlier. This new habit is over.” Crossing my arms, leaning against the door.

He didn’t look at me, instead reaching for his shirt. Oh. He knew how to infuriate me.

“When I move in, we’re using the locks.” I snatched the shirt from his hand. “Learn

to delegate torturing people.” Throwing the shirt to the ground. “If you don’t start taking better care of yourself, I’ll be a young widow. So, stop being selfish.”

He continued to stare at me. As if questioning if he had heard me right.

“See how exhausted you are? You’re staring at me as if I’m a hallucination.” Shaking my head, “Sleep, then shower. I’m not talking to you until the end of the day, and I swear to God, Vince. You walk out that front door, you’ll regret it.”

I sent a message to my uncle Cole, saying that I wouldn’t be making it to the meeting. Then I went back to painting my toenails.

Movement out of the corner of my eye caused me to look back. Vince was leaning against the doorway, watching me. How long had he been there?

Shirtless, he walked towards me, his hair wet from the shower. Him and his effortless sex appeal.

I had expected him to try to leave at some point today, but he hadn’t. Putting the lid on the nail polish, pretending I didn’t feel him watching me.

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“I could get used to this.”

The corner of my lips twitched up. “What, red nail polish on your marble?” I wiggled forward, placing my feet closer to the fire. Perfect.

Squealing as he wrapped his arm around me, lifting me from the ground. “I was joking! I didn’t spill any! I swear.”

Holding me back to his chest with one arm, he dragged the lounge closer to the fire. “Don’t act like I would care.”

“You cared when Bas dropped the paint,”

“No, I cared that he dropped it and got it on you.” He sat down, still holding me to his chest, “And I don’t like it when you lay on the ground.”

How did he know I was about to lie down? “Fine,” I moved off him, getting in the right position again. He held my hair up before I laid back on his leg.

If this was to be the rest of my life, I would be okay with that. Taking his hand, I started to trace his hand tattoo, then over his rings.

Until him, I had only experienced angry silence.

“What happened here?” his finger ran under a bruise on my collarbone.

“Accident at the vacation house.”

He paused, “Vacation? When did you go away?”

“I left that night, after leaving here.” I sighed. “I only got back yesterday. Nothing like a family gathering to test my sanity.” Slowly, I traced the tattoo over his wrist and up his arm. “But I did buy these gorgeous navy stilettos. So, the trip wasn’t a complete waste.”

Silence again. It wasn’t angry silence, but different. I could feel he wanted to say something.

“Vince, can I ask you a question?”

“My love,” his fingers ran through my hair, “when have you ever needed permission to ask me anything?”

Biting my lip, he was right. Focusing on his hand, “Are you sure you want to marry me? I don’t want you doing it out of guilt or something.” Holding his hand, I sat up. “I know I’m not your type, so, are you sure you want to?”

After four years with him, it was clear he wasn’t attracted to me. The list of seductions I had tried on him at twenty was humiliating. And twice, I had directly asked him for sex. Which made his need to touch me just more confusing at the beginning.

He ran his thumb over my cheek before holding the side of my face. “I’m sure.”

I’d never wanted a tattoo, and I had sworn I would never get one. Running my hand down his arm.

“Does it hurt?” Staring at all his tattoos. “Getting tattooed?”

“Depends on the person.”

Climbing off the couch, I stood in front of him. “Can I see your tattoo again?”

He smirked. “Which one?”

“Which one do you think, Vinny? I need to be reminded how big it is again.”

His eyes widened. Did he seriously not know what I meant? Part of the Crows Oath was the tattooing within the ceremony. God. Only he could get me going back on my one rule.

Standing up, he turned. The Crows family emblem. It was bigger than I remembered. Staring at the large gap within the emblem design, across the back of his shoulders. Left intentionally empty.

My name would go there.

Madeline Crow.

Just thinking of my name change sent a wave of nerves through me, let alone seeing it tattooed across his back.

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“And you would come with me, right? For the start of it?” I’d have to get the full crest before the wedding.

“I’ll come for every sitting for the crest,” he turned, grabbing my hand. “And when you get my name, I’ll be getting yours right beside you.”

Yeah, and a thousand or more people will be watching us.

I slowly nodded. “Okay,”

I’d made peace with what we had a long time ago. The way he loved me now was more than I ever thought I’d get.

“Okay what?”

“Okay, I’ll marry you.”

The shock on his face, as if there was ever a chance I’d pick his cousin over him.

CHAPTER 21

Vince

Nikolai handed his menu back to the waitress after ordering. Bastion and Luca shared a look. The two of them were acting strange tonight. When one wasn’t staring at me, the other was.

“So, um, I changed the menu. Added a heap of new dishes.” Luca said, tapping the table.

Glancing at Nikolai. Had he noticed how weird the twins were acting tonight? Bastions knee was jumping every few seconds and Luca had word vomit. Though the longer I looked at Nikolai, the more I got concerned about him. He looked sick.

“I’ll have the same as him.” I handed the waitress the menu.

“Nik ordered steak.” Luca said, staring at me.

“And?” I checked my watch. It wasn’t like her to be this late.

“Unfucking believable.” He muttered before asking the waitress just to bring the whiskey over.

“What is going on with them?” I muttered under my breath at Nik, who seemed to be in his own weird mood.

“So Rome can’t make it. Said um, he was real busy.” Bastion gulped a full glass of whiskey down, “So I thought um, if you need someone tonight, I’ll come with you.”

Why would I need someone? And when did we start to consider hiding at the brothels as real busy? Had the boyslost their minds? So this is what happens to them, when I’m unavailable for a week.

“What did you let happen to them this week?” Looking at Nikolai. “One week. You had to look after them for one week.”

“What? How is this my fault?”

“Romes hiding at the brothels. Luca has word vomit. Bastion has a nervous twitch and is volunteering to come with me to torture people.”

“Right, of course. Blame me.” Nik took the whiskey off the waitress.

Bastion started cursing under his breath. Following his eyeline. Finally, she is here.

Pointing between the twins, “Whatever this is, stop it.” Looking at Nikolai. “You and I will talk about this later.”

“Oh hi Maddy,” Bastion quickly spoke, as soon as she reached the table. “Are you by yourself tonight? If not, there is a better restaurant across the road. Great for um celebrating and real romantic too. Great for couples. Better than, um, this one.”

What the fuck was wrong with him? There was a theater across the road. Had he started using drugs? Madeline stared at him, confused. Like any sane person would.

“Just ignore him.” I got up, pulling the chair out beside me for her. Before they could scare her off.

So much for no serious damage could happen with me taking one week off.

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Sitting back down, I dragged Madeline's chair closer to mine. Before resting my hand on her thigh.

“So Maddy, I heard you’ve got engaged.” Luca said, only for Bastion to hit him hard.

“Serious?” Bas yelled, glancing at the door again. “This situation isn’t hard enough without reminding him. How are you, my twin?”

“What? I didn’t ask her who!”

I lit a cigarette.

“I’m so confused.” Madeline muttered, looking at them.

Maybe that conversation with Nikolai can’t wait. She took the cigarette from me.

I hadn’t realized how much I missed her smoking with me until she was back.

Squeezing her thigh. Thank fuck she said yes.

Had the twins done a line of cocaine while I wasn’t looking? What the fuck was with those stupid grins?

“Alright, I’m starting to get concerned now. What is with you two?” Madeline asked, taking my whiskey. “Are you two just being weird because of our engagement?”

“I haven’t told them, so it wouldn’t be that.” I glanced at Nik. “Unless you told

them.”

“How could I tell them? I didn’t know she said yes.” Why was he looking at me like that? “Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been about you all week, Vince? The sleep I’ve lost worrying about you?” Finishing his whiskey. “How many times I have walked to your house and walked back? Worried. You’ve never asked for time off. Ever.”

“You could have called.”

“I did.”

Right. I had forgotten to call him back.

He shook his head. “I had my medication increased.”

“Well, you know now.”

Nik opened his mouth, ready to keep arguing.

“Stop it Nikolai, we’re just glad you’re back, Maddy,” Bastion cut him off. “So fucking happy you're back.”

No one would be nearly as happy as I was.

My life was liveable again.

CHAPTER 22

Madeline

It was a permanent piece of art on my body. Forever. Staring in the mirror at the stencil. I would have to restyle every backless dress to compliment it.

“It is a big piece for your first.” the tattoo artist gave me an uneasy smile. Apparently, she wasn’t allowed to talk to me. Which I insisted she didn’t listen to.

“I can break up the tattoo sessions for the crest in to as many as you need.”

I nodded, but my eyes were not leaving the mirror.

“The lettering is done on the day, but I thought you might want to see the full design. With his name.”

It wasn’t what she said, it was how she said it. His name.

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“Do you know Vince?” I met her eyes in the mirror.

“Not really. He is um. Intense.”

Suppressing my smile. How sweet she is concerned for me. I glanced at the clock. Of course, he is late. I suppose I had asked him again last night; he was sure.

“Okay, let's start.” Walking to the chair, “How do I sit?”

I could do this. I totally could do this. Though I hated my ears getting pierced. How bad could it be? Sitting forward, straddling the chair, she moved the arm rest up for me.

The door opened. Vince. Thank Christ.

“Fuck, I'm sorry.” He dragged a stool in front of me. “Tell me you haven't started?”

“I thought you'd forgotten.” I sighed, watching as he shrugged his jacket off. For some reason, he started unbuttoning his shirt.

“Did you, um, need to check it, Mr. Crow?”

I grinned. Mr. Crow. I was so using that later.

“Are you happy with it?” he asked me before looking, his expression changing instantly.

“The lettering was just for her. To see the full design.” The tattoo artist spoke really fast, as if she was suddenly scared. “I um, yeah.”

He nodded but seemed lost for words. I’d never seen that look before.

Taking his shirt off, he gestured for me to sit back.

He helped me put his shirt on, before taking the top I had been holding to my chest away.

“Happy?” he asked me again.

I’d be a lot happier when this part was over. “Yep.”

Frowning at seeing him in his singlet, what if he gets cold?

The buzzing of the gun caused my stomach to twist. Reaching for my hands, he sat in front of me. If I didn’t know him better, I’d say he was nervous.

Kissing my cheek, “I’m right here my love,” His thumbs stroking the back of my hand.

Okay, it wasn’t as bad as I expected it to be. Sharp, burning, uncomfortable. Loosening my death grip on his fingers.

Every few minutes, he kept asking if I was okay. At first, I was, but after a while, it got more intense. Closing my eyes, trying to focus on his touch, and not the thousands of tiny little needles. Why would anyone get this done willingly?

He brushed my hair to the side, kissing the top of my head. Apart from smiling at him volunteering his hand for me to bite, I didn’t say a word. I sat deadly still, eyes

closed, declined breaks, and pretended this wasn't the most painful experience of my life.

Three and a half hours. Three and a half long, painful hours. Even though the artist kept telling me, I could stop. Our circumstances weren't normal. I had done the math. The crest had to be done and healed before the wedding.

"I'm so proud of you." He kissed my cheek again, buttoning his shirt up on me. He insisted on me wearing it. Apparently, my top would be too tight. In fairness, he probably was right.

"Can you drop me home? Otherwise, I'll have to call my driver." I asked, rolling the sleeve up.

"Are you okay?" holding my chin, he tilted my head back to look at him.

No. I wasn't okay. It hurt. My back was sore. My neck is stiff and I'm tired. Even though that made no sense, because all I did was sit.

"Why would I drop you at your parents? You're coming home with me."

I could feel the emotions bubbling. Why can't I be normal? "You don't have to do that." Moving my head out of his grip, I focused on rolling the sleeves up. He had just wasted half his day holding my hand.

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It was sad that it wasn't even a metaphor.

He legitimately held my hand for four hours.

He started rolling the other sleeve up, not saying anything.

“So, will you take me home?” I grabbed my phone off the table, avoiding his eyes.

“I'll take you home.”

Great. So, then I can burst into tears and process this already. It wasn't just the tattoo. Every time I read the Crows Oath, I find a new ritual to keep me up at night. Like the claiming ritual.

I should have known he agreed too quickly. He used the word *hometoo* freely. Vince wasn't the type of guy that hovered, but since we got back to his house. He hadn't left my side for more than a few minutes.

As if scared as soon as he was out of my sight, I'd change my mind and not marry him. Which made no sense, because his family's crest is now outlined on my back.

Though, him being this nervous was a great distraction from my own problems.

Laying on my stomach, I looked across the couch. Immediately, he looked down at his phone. Again. Pretending not to be watching me.

“Vince, I need to ask you a question.”

He nodded, looking suddenly pale.

“I read the oath again last night. It says we have to have children.” It actually had a suggested number of what is expected. No wonder they all have big families. “What if I can’t have them? Is there consequences if we don’t?”

“Mom did us all by surrogates. Normally two at once. It’s why we’re all close in age.”

I’m sure having one newborn was hard enough, let alone two newborns in one year. Gosh, imagine the twins and Rome in the same year. Three.

“I’m not having children.” Running his hand over his head, “It’s not up for discussion. I’ve given my life to the oath. I’m not giving kids as well.”

That was fair. He and Nikolai had already raised children.

Vince skipped being a teenager and went straight to being a parent.

Most fifteen-year-olds don’t have to care for five children under five.

Then there was the thing with his grandfather. Which he refused to talk about.

“About the blood thing. Do they really all do that to me?” Only his family had a book as thick as the bible full of their own twisted rituals.

That distant look in his eyes, as he nodded.

“What about the um,” I paused, my stomach twisted into a tight knot, “After the ceremony, do they really watch us?” Every time I read that ritual, I hoped I had read it wrong. “They watch us fuck. All of them?”

Again, he nodded. God. I felt suddenly sick.

“When the time comes, you’re to keep your eyes on me. Just focus on me.”

“I highly doubt every one of your male relatives and their wives, will turn suddenly invisible.”

Getting up, he walked towards me, kneeling in front of me. “Is that what’s upsetting you?” he brushed my hair back. “Talk to me, my love, please.” Stroking my cheek. “Have you changed your mind?”

Had I changed my mind? Was he serious? I had sat through nearly four hours of pain for him. And I still had more to look forward to!

Not to mention our families had decided on this merger.

If he didn’t look physically sick from asking that question, I would yell at him.

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“No, I haven’t.” Reaching for his hand, “I’m just tired. You don’t have to stay home; I’m not going to run away or something.”

Looking instantly calmer, he kissed the side of my head again.

What I would do to get in his head and to understand his beautifully damaged mind.

His need to touch me, how he treats me, but still tells himself he doesn’t love me.

Someone had seriously fucked up how his mind worked.

Sometimes it is hard to love a man so complicated.

CHAPTER 23

Vince

I had never seen so many boxes in my life. If I didn’t know Madeline, I would mistake them as moving boxes.

“You’ve been shopping?”

She looked up from the middle of our bed. “It’s not like that; I’ll have a new last name. I might need a new style.”

“My love, just say you wanted new clothes. You don’t need to make excuses.”

“I wanted new clothes.” She grinned, jumping off the bed, and followed me into the bathroom. “Are you busy?”

“Bloody.” I pulled off my jacket, her face wrinkling up at my shirt. “I’ll get the rest after I shower.”

“Oh, you saw those?”

Unbuttoning my shirt. Did I see the mountain of delivery boxes next to the stairs? God. She was cute.

I nodded.

“I was getting them. I just got distracted.” She put her hand out for my shirt. “Possible evidence?”

“No, just reminding someone who they work for.”

She grinned, taking it from me. “One more question. Why does all the food here not have labels?”

“No idea. My chef manages the food.” And they now spend an extra few hours a week making sure the labels weren’t readable. So, it made counting calories near impossible.

“Did you steal a delivery truck?” Bas asked, standing in the foyer.

“No, Madeline has been shopping.”

“Now I see why you had your wardrobe extended.”

I shrugged. “Actually, if you want my car, you have to help me move this upstairs.”

“Does this suit say mover to you?” He shook his head, “Like fuck?—”

“Bastion! I thought you were another delivery driver.” Madeline ran down the stairs. Her hair was pinned up. And within seconds, my brother’s expression changed.

“Sorry to disappoint Maddy.” He grinned, slowly looking her up and down.

“Oh, you’re never a disappointment,”

“You’re too kind to me,” He winked at her. “So, Vince was just saying he needs my young muscles to help move these boxes upstairs.”

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“At no point did I ask for his underdeveloped muscles.”

“Maddy, don’t lift that. I got it.” Bastion stepped in, taking the smallest box I had seen in my life off her. She smiled before moving another.

While he stared at her ass. Openly checking out his soon to be sister-in-law. The man has no self-respect.

“So, do you need to try any of these clothes on, make sure they all fit? I’m really good at zippers. Hell, I would love a fashion walk.”

Her eyes lit up. Over my god damn body, would that be happening.

“Ignore him. He is leaving.” I opened the door, shoving him back. “Important meeting.” I handed him the car keys. “You damage the car; I’ll damage your face? Understand?”

He grinned, taking the keys. "Thanks brother, have a good night.”

It wasn’t until hours later, after I had carried every box up, that I realized he had done that shit on purpose to get out of helping me.

I had somehow upset my fiancé; I just was too scared to ask what I had done. Madeline was being polite. And it scared the living hell out of me.

I even volunteered to watch her trashy television show. She turned me down. Apparently, she was far too busy cleaning.

Sadly, for me, and anything I owned of value. She had found a bleach cleaning spray and was using it on everything. Despite it said bathroom only in bold letters. I didn't have the heart to tell her, so I sat quietly, watching her destroy the television.

“Cheating man whore.”

“I'm a what?”

Where had she even come from? I left her in the lounge room, after she started destroying the hard wood coffee table.

“I am a reasonable woman, Vince.” She put a hand on her hip. “I know I'm not your type, and I'm not stupid.”

I didn't know where this was going, but that look in her eyes it made me sick.

Straightening her shoulders back, “It hurts more that you lied to me. You never lie to me” she looked down at the carpet before looking back up. “So, who is she? I want to meet her.”

I shouldn't have come home.

“I drove your car today.” She added, as if that was meant to prompt me.

I nodded; unsure what else I could do.

“The words cheating man whore are sprayed painted across it. And guess what Vince, I didn't do it.” She pointed the bleach bottle at me. “Which means another woman did!”

Bastion.

I should have known just from the degree of suffering I was experiencing; he was the cause of it.

Madeline followed me as I walked down to the garage. I should have known there would have been a reason he needed to borrow a car. For fuck sake. The man had a fleet of his own.

Walking past twenty other vehicles until I reached my limited-edition, custom-built satin black sports car.

The only reason Madeline had taken it this morning was because Bastion had left it blocking the garage. Conveniently, the passenger side was facing the other way.

Cheating man whore. Written in cheap white spray paint.

“One last time, what is her name?”

“Bastion.” Putting the phone to my ear,

Her face melted in understanding.

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“Big bro, I’m telling you it was all a miscommunication?” Bas answered the first call.

I could bet he had been waiting all day for me to call him. “Look, hear me out. A woman I had seen twice thought she saw me the other night, but she saw Luca. Crazy woman followed me last night to the suburbs.”

“Really?”

“Yes, now you see it from my point of view. Honestly, I’m a victim here.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose. I had just suffered through Madeline cleaning half my house with bleach. I was the victim.

“Bastion, on that particular night, were you pretending to be Luca?”

If he thought, I didn’t know about the game they played. He had to think I was stupid. I swear, it was a matter of time before it blows up in their face.

He groaned, “Come on Vince, that’s not fair. Not everyone knows to ask that question.”

“My fiancé thought I was cheating on her.”

“Oh, shit I upset Maddy?” Actual remorse in his voice. Who knew he was capable of it? “Fine, just come over and punch me already. I’ve got a busy night.”

Grinning, “No brother, I’m going to wait. When you least expect it, you’ll get

payback for this.”

“Fuck that Vince, come hit me or something already. You know I can’t stand waiting.”

I ended the call. The sheepish look on her face. “Sorry Vince, I umm” she moved back and forth on her heels. “Can we watch my show now? And order food?”

I had a feeling her mood would change when I told her the television wouldn’t be working.

Tomorrow I was contacting the cleaners to ask them to keep all cleaning products out of sight. Maybe I could get them a safe or something.

CHAPTER 24

Madeline

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” I faked a small smile.

Clark slowly ran his tongue over his bottom lip. “Absolutely not,” he gently took the gun from me. “No need for you to be covered in recoil bruises just for me.”

Seriously, it works every time. “Such a gentleman.” Stepping back, watching as he shoots the targets. Silencing my phone when it started to ring, by turning it off. If anything, him realizing he had my undivided attention only helped.

Twenty minutes of ego stroking, before he was ready to step away from the field and negotiate on price. Even with his lunch offer declined, we still got above the expected asking price.

Nate owed me for this. Normally, I dealt with the supplier. It had been years since I handled a buyer. Though it was nice to know I still had it.

Opening my car door, I waited until his cars pulled away.

“I don’t need an escort back,” I looked at the security team. “Tell my uncles to call me if they have a problem with it.” Seriously, having one car was intense, but the five following me around was excessive.

One grabbed my car door, stopping me.

“Mr. Crow has requested that you turn your phone on.”

My eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

He looked immediately uncomfortable. “Your phone. He has requested it to be turned back on.”

Looking at the five cars. “How many of you answer to him?”

Why hadn’t I even questioned the sudden extra security team?

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“Your team was replaced a few weeks ago.”

A few weeks ago. Right. “Well, I’ll rephrase it. You can tell Mr. Crow if he has a problem with it to talk to me.”

He nodded, stepping away from my car.

I closed the door and purposely locked it. Taking my heels off, I looked back in the revision mirror.

Alright, so that is five. Where are the others?

Turning out of the property. Putting my foot down quickly. One sedan pulled out from the driveway, as I drove past and then another, which just pulled up the road, indicated entering the traffic. Well, at least the cars were silver. Not as painfully obvious.

Weaving through the traffic, it wasn’t even five minutes before I had a full five car security detail following me again. Unbelievable.

Replacing my security team without even telling me. Seriously. Why wouldn’t my family mention it? Taking a deep breath. He’s just protective. I was overreacting.

It’s just a lot of change. I gripped the steering wheel tighter.

This comes with his family. The risk of ransoms is higher. Slowing my speed down and not being difficult for them to follow. Everything with their family is more

intense.

The waitress hadn't even brought my drink over before Vince walked through the doors. No surprise his henchmen reported to him where I was.

Because I sure as hell hadn't turned my phone on.

After purposely taking the long way back, then driving aimlessly around the city, talking myself through all these changes. Now I was ready to deal with whatever his issue was.

He pulled the chair out across from me. The waitress placing my drink beside me.

"Busy day?" I asked.

"Why did you turn your phone off?"

"I was working." Sipping my drink, "Men with real strong egos, like my full attention," the waitress placed the food down in front of us. "I ordered for you. So, what is so important you've tracked me down in the middle of the day?"

"So glad you asked, my love. I got a call from my lawyer this morning." Reaching into his jacket, he unfolded a piece of paper. "Do you want to explain this?"

I took it from him. Oh. Surely this wasn't what had upset him. "It is an agreement I had added to our merger."

"An agreement I signed, without knowing."

"If that is true, you really need a new lawyer."

“Madeline, explain this now.”

I arched my eyebrows.

“It’s an agreement for sex outside of the marriage.” Unfolding the piece of paper, seeming as he was set on being dramatic. “No more than five times with the same person, no criminal connections, stops unneeded retaliation and they must sign an NDA. And I added health checks, sure it won’t affect me physically but emotionally. It would break me to see you sick.”

He stared at me. Not saying a word.

After what happened with the car. I realized we needed to put something official in place.

Vince could handle not having sex for a bit, but in the end, he would go get it from somewhere. This put rules in place and gave me peace of mind.

“I know I’m not your type,” I tapped the piece of paper. So many times at the beginning, I read his actions wrong. It had taken me a long time to learn, just because he touched me, didn’t mean he wanted me.

“I don’t want to lose what we have, because we end up resenting each other.” I pushed the food away from me, folding the piece of paper. “And I want my own room, at your house.”

“You’ve always slept in my bed.”

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“Yeah, but a few nights a week is different to every night for the rest of our lives. Come on, we will both need space.”

How could he not understand that living together, we would need space from each other?

Sure, he could handle sharing a bed with me a few days a week. How would he handle me when I was on my period, or when I’m in one of my moods.

“We’ll just do what we do now. But my other room is in your house instead of my parents.”

I was focused on minimizing all the ways he could end up resenting me.

CHAPTER 25

Vince

“Surprised you didn’t bring Maddy, seriously, we had bets you would break the tradition.” Rome dealt another round of cards

I shrugged. I had every intention of bringing her. Until she walked into the lounge room dressed like that for him.

The jealousy was back just thinking about it.

“Okay, what happened?” Rome was still staring at me. The man noticed too much.

“She’s at a dinner with a client.” It bothered me how much I didn’t know about her family’s business.

“And?”

“And what?”

“So, nothing else happened?” Rome shared a look at Bastion and Luca, who were both far too interested in our conversation.

“No. She handed me the signed contract, and she left.”

“Now we’re getting closer to something,” Bastion grinned, taking a joint off Rome, and swiping my lighter.

“Where the hell is Nikolai? Since when did he start being hours late for anything?”

“What was the contract for?” Bastion asked, lighting the joint.

“The official merger and an agreement giving us permission to have sex outside of our marriage.”

Bastion looked at me shocked, “You didn’t sign it, right?”

I glared at my cards. I had signed it, unknowingly. But I sure as fuck wasn’t saying that.

“Oh fuck, you did. You signed a contract willingly to let other men fuck your wife.” he looked at Luca, then Rome. “Our grandfather has permanently fucked him up.” He waved his hand at me. “Is he even fixable?”

I stopped myself from scoffing. While glaring at my cards. Another bad hand.

“So, why did you sign it?” Luca glanced at me before pushing more chips into the middle.

Nikolai walked in hours late. “Sorry, got held up with Marcel. Are you all ready to leave?” he looked from the table to us. “Fuck it.” Taking his tie off, he gestured for Bastion to hand him the weed. “What did I miss?”

“Overdue therapy session for Vincent, after he signed a contract to let other men fuck his wife.” Bastion rolled another joint.

Nikolai scoffed loudly. Great, now I was going to get judgement from him too.

“For fuck’s sake Bastion. I signed it without knowing, and she had it added without telling me.” Tossing my cards back in the middle.

“Why would she add it?” Nik asked.

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“Apparently, she thinks she isn’t my type.” I clicked at Rome, “pass me that.”

“To be fair, you have told her that repeatedly over the years.” Rome tossed me my lighter.

“And then you’ve treated her like a girlfriend. No wonder the woman is confused.” Luca flipped his cards over, winning again.

That’s it, I’m not playing.

“Well, you told her why you couldn’t back then, right?” Nik pulled a chair out next to me.

He could not be serious.

“Wait, there was a reason for it?” Rome looked between Nikolai and I. “All this time we just assumed you really had no idea what the fuck a friendship was.”

Bastion nodded. “I even put magnets on your fridge.”

Of course, it was him that was behind those ridiculous magnets. Define a friend. What is a friend. What is a friendship.

Every few months, they randomly appeared to haunt me. Madeline was right. I needed to start locking my front door.

Nikolai looked suddenly uncomfortable, and so he fucking should.

Now the three of them were looking at me way too fucking interested.

“I told you there would be a reason,” Bastion turned to Luca, “Pay up.”

If I could murder someone with a look, Nikolai would be dead.

“Alright enough, if we had done a quarter of the shit Vince has done for our family, we would have had to sacrifice the same.” Nik threw back his drink. “What we have was built on him. I was too busy raising you all. Speaking of which, twins made it to twenty. That’s an accomplishment.” He glanced at me. “Two teenagers raised five kids. God damn miracle.”

Or a horror show. I shrugged.

“So, are we heading out, or is it going to be as depressing as ours?” Nik pushed his seat back.

“What did you do for yours?” Bastion asked, grabbing his suit jacket.

“Spent it at home. It was a school night. And Vince canceled his because Cecilia was sick.”

“No, she had appendicitis and ended up having surgery.” The second worse experience of my life. Right after burying our mother.

Nic clicked his fingers. “That’s right.”

Like normal, he knew when to change the subject.

The boys walked ahead of us, only for Nik to grab my arm.

“I’m sorry, about before. They’ll never understand.”

I nodded.

“Sometimes I wonder what our life would have been like if we never killed him.”

Luca shouted for us to hurry up.

“You didn’t kill him Nik. I did.” I shoved my hands in my pockets,

I looked back when he didn’t start walking. Of all nights to have this conversation again.

“It all worked out in the end. Right?” Stepping forward, I grabbed his shoulder, “Come on brother, let the dead rest. I’m sure given our lifestyle; we’ll be there before long, anyway.”

CHAPTER 26

Vince

Suddenly, every man in the world was my enemy. The random valet who held the door open for her, anyone that spoke to her, or worse, if they made her smile. I took that as a personal fucking threat.

I retaliated against a waiter last night who made her laugh. The poor bastard was probably still wondering who jumped him in the alley. There was also the shop assistant, the car dealer, and at this point, it was easier to make a list of who I managed to walk away from.

Each day that passed, I lost a bit more of my sanity. I wasn't sure how much longer I could keep this up. For the health and wellbeing of everyone else, maybe I shouldn't.

Looking at the clock again. It was after two in the morning. She still wasn't home. Logically, I know she wouldn't lie to me, so she was with her uncle. But the jealous raging monster side of me was worried. She was with someone else.

Turning over again. How was this bed so uncomfortable without her? Fuck it. Maybe I could call her.

Just as I reached for my phone, the bedroom door opened.

“Are you still awake?” she frowned, closing the door.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“Well, turning the lights off usually helps.” Yawning, she pulled her jumper off. “I smell like plane air. Private plane or not, it still takes forever.”

Had she left the city? It wasn’t my place to ask. Tapping my finger on my thigh.

“I’m going to shower,” she stumbled over something on the ground. I hated seeing her this exhausted. Why did her uncles think it was acceptable?

“You’re too tired, you could slip in the shower and hurt yourself.”

She laughed, “You’re funny.”

“Just come to bed.”

Like normal, she ignored me. The shower was running a few seconds later.

So, I got up and followed her.

“Madeline, I am serious.” I walked into the bathroom. “Fine, if you are insisting on showering, I’m supervising.”

Acting as if that was only for her benefit, and not also mine, I’m sure has sealed my place in hell.

“I don’t care.” She turned in front of me, raising her arms, “But you can help.”

I can help.

This shower was the best idea she had ever had.

Gripping the end of her T-shirt, I pulled it over her head.

“Do you know how long we had to wait on that stupid runway? Three hours. And do you want to know why?” she reached around unclipping her bra. “My uncle had told my cousins, the wrong airfield.”

Dropping her bra to the ground, she unbuttoned the top of her jeans before I took over.

“A normal person wouldn’t just wait at an empty airfield.” Kneeling in front of her, she held my shoulder as I pulled her jeans off. “But not my cousins. Both waited. Until I called them.”

I hooked my thumbs under the sides of her G-string dragging it down.

Fuck.

She’s perfect.

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“And that wasn’t even the worse of it,” shaking her head, she walked around me, clipping her hair up before walking into the shower.

Running my hand over my jaw. Should I go in? I couldn’t do anything if she slipped out here. Fuck it.

Pushing my boxers down, I followed her in. She turned, surprised.

Damn, flushed cheeks suit her.

“I thought you were supervising?”

“I am,” taking a step closer, “but you also asked if I could help.”

That cute little frown of hers.

“Only use that body wash, not that one. And not that loafer, it’s too hard on my skin.” She pointed to the side before turning back around, standing under the shower, leaning on the tiles.

Taking a broken breath while I watched the water run down her back. Fuck the loafers. I was using my hands.

How slowly could I drag this out? Rubbing her shoulders, the small moan from her lips made my dick harder.

I slowly worked down her back, reaching her ass. I couldn’t stop myself from

squeezing her as I kneeled.

My dick was fucking aching. I'd never needed sex like this before.

She parted her legs as I worked down her thigh, making sure to not go too high. The first time I touch her; it won't be like this.

It was going to be near impossible to let her shower by herself now. She turns to face me, but her foot slips.

I go to grab her, but I'm too late as she falls on to me.

"Fuck, are you okay?" Holding her tightly to me. I had one job. One fucking job.

"Your hands are too relaxing," she mumbled into my chest. Not pulling away from me. She moved her arm around my neck and looked at me. "I'm sorry."

She is okay. I held her to my chest as I stood up.

"You have to sign that merger again. I had that agreement removed." I pushed the wet hair from her face.

"Why...I thought?—"

"Have you seen me with anyone else? Between raising my five siblings, having Nik who is like a needy partner and running a global criminal organization. I spend every other moment with you." I traced her bottom lip with my thumb. "Since the second you walked into my life, I've only treated you as mine. When you're my wife, I'm fucking you. And only you."

I lowered my mouth to hers. "And I'm really fucking tired of not kissing you."

Love was a weak word for what I felt for her.

She consumed me. Without her I didn't exist, nor did I fucking want to.

It was a deep burning, all mind consuming need. She was my oxygen. And I was tired, so fucking tired of being deprived of her.

Every smile, every laugh, every adorable pout belonged to me.

“Will you please, for the sake of this family, stop letting men sleep with Maddy?” Bastion gestured at the table, “Unprovoked assault on the average working class man has increased by half. Restaurants have put up bulletins.”

Rolling my eyes. “You're lying Bastion.”

“I'm not.” he showed me a picture on his phone. “See, that is a map with hotspot areas, and this is a public fucking notice about the sudden increase in unprovoked attacks.”

I shrugged.

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“Fine, fuck the average person. You are making our lives hell. You’re always grumpy, you can’t take a joke and honestly, it’s becoming a workplace hazard.”

Looking from him to Nikolai. “So, are we going to talk business now? Or do I have to keep listening to this?”

“That’s it. After this meeting, I’m going to talk to Maddy. Make her see reason.”

I was up within a second, walking around the table. "You stay the fuck away from her.”

“Boys!” Nikolai and Rome stood between us. “Enough.”

“Since when is my fiancé’s sex life a family fucking discussion?”

“Since it started to affect me!” Bastion yelled as I went to reach for him around Nikolai. “And any poor bastard that looks at her! Public safety warnings have been issued! Actual posters in staff rooms telling them to leave the venues in pairs!”

“If you don’t shut him up, I will.” I shoved Nik only for him to push me back.

“Shut me up? Why can’t you just tell your fiancé you’re not okay with her sleeping with other men?”

“Alright enough!” Nik pointed at Bas. “Everyone, sit down now.”

Rome let go of Bas. But I sure as fuck wasn’t sitting down.

“Alright back to actual business,” Nik looked between us. “Luca, you start. Vince sit down.”

I did, but I wasn’t happy about it.

Bas pulled out his phone, ignoring us. Nothing annoyed me more than split focus. The bastard was purposely playing on his phone to get under my skin.

“Vince, did you hear me?” Nik was waiting for my report on the buildings.

I kicked Bastion's leg under the table. “Is this meeting not important enough for you?”

Ignoring Nik, cursing under his breath.

Bastion continued to stare at his screen.

I looked at Nikolai to do something while Luca glanced at Bas’s screen. The way Luca's expression changed.

“What is he doing?” I asked Luca.

He shook his head.

“What the fuck is he doing?!” I yelled, standing up. “Will you do something?” I looked at Nik. “Teach him basic manners.”

“I’m getting too old for this.” Nik sighed, “Bas, get off your phone.”

“One minute, or I’m breaking it. Do you hear me Bastion? I’ll break that fucking thing!”

“I’m nearly done,” he muttered.

“What’s so important that it has to be done right now, huh? While I’m meant to be talking?”

Bastion dragged his eyes off the screen to look at me.

“You seem to be able to talk just fine right now. Why can’t you just give the report while I’m using my phone?”

“I’m gonna kill him.” I looked at Nik. “Control him before I strangle him.”

“Wow, Vince overreacting and resorting to violence. What a shock.” Bas snorted.
“Alright, I’m done.”

Luca sighed, sharing a look at Rome.

“Bastion, what did you do?”

He shrugged. “Just sent a message to your fiancé, begging her to keep her fucking legs closed. Attached the posters too. I made it clear her fucking strangers is hurting innocent people.”

I tossed the table, lunging at him, and just like that, the meeting ended.

CHAPTER 27

Madeline

Walking into the lounge room, Vince was icing his hand, staring at the fire. A full glass of whiskey untouched on the coffee table.

“Are you okay?” I walked around the couch to stand in front of him.

My stomach twisted. Something had happened. That cold, distant look in his eyes.

“What happened?” I kneeled in front of him, cupping his cheek. Then I saw his tears.

Vince never cried.

Panic rushes through me. Pushing him back slightly so I could sit over him.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I hugged him. My heart beating way too fast.

For Vince to be in a state like this. Something must have happened to one of his siblings.

After five minutes or longer, I pulled back just slightly.

“Vinny, will you please say something?” I leaned my forehead against his. “Please.”

“Where have you been?”

I frowned. Pulling back. “Are you sure you want to talk about me? And not what is going on with you?”

The distance in his eyes scared me.

He nodded.

Maybe he just needed a distraction.

We never talked about business. Of course, the first time I ever consider speaking about it had to be the same night that I looked terrible at what I did.

“We had a shipment hijacked during transport.” Tracing his neck tattoo. “This is the second one this month. Nothing about it makes sense. We even flew the guns down to a private airfield from our warehouse up north, in case the one here was being watched.”

His hand rested on my lower back.

Holding his face, I forced him to look at me. “Now. Are you okay?”

“Bastion and I got into a fight.”

I sighed.

Out of all his brothers, Bastion was the most dependent on him. While Luca or Rome would go to Nikolai with a problem, Bas would only turn to Vince.

Over the years, it was hard not to see the pattern. If something great happened in Bastion’s life, he called Vince. If his world was ending, he would call Vince. And for everything else in between, he still called Vince.

“I hit him pretty hard.” He looked away from me. “I’ve never seen him look at me like that.” His voice broke, “terrified of me.”

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Their fights never escalated this far. “Where were the others?” Why hadn’t one of them stepped in before it got that far?

“They pulled me off him.”

“All three of them?”

He slowly nodded.

I wiped the tears from his cheek, holding his face. “Well, give Bas a few days. Then apologize. You two will work it out.”

Wiping away his silent tears.

“He loves you, and one heated fight won’t change that.”

He might have heard what I said, but I could tell he didn’t believe me.

There was nothing I hated more than seeing him this upset.

Tracing his cheek, I leaned closer to his mouth, softly kissing him.

At first, he was still. As if he was shocked.

After the other night in the shower, all I thought about was this.

Though, I probably chose a terrible time to kiss him. Holding me tighter to him, as he

finally kissed me back.

VINCE

The next morning, I walked to Bastion's house.

I hoped by the time I arrived, I would know what to say. But once I saw him. I couldn't form a word.

He stepped back out of my way, leaving the door open. By the suit and tired expression, he had worked at the club last night.

I closed the door. Fuck. "Did you get looked at?"

He didn't answer me, just leaned against the pillar staring at the ground.

I ran my hand over my head.

His busted lip, swollen jaw. How had I lost control like that?

"Nik likes to think you were better, but you weren't." he looked at me, one eye bloodshot. "She was the one to pull you from that. Not us. Not Nik. Her."

The longer I stared at him, the more damage I saw. My handprint around his neck. "Come on, I'm getting?—"

"I nearly lost you. That night because of Damius. If it wasn't for her. We would have lost you." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Now, any chance of you losing her. It scares me."

I just stared at him.

“Did she ever ask why you were on that side of town?” he pushed away from the pillar. “The night you two met.”

“No, she never asked.”

He slowly nodded.

“Bastion, about last night. I am sorry. There is never a reason for me to act like that to you.”

I’d never seen him like this. No smart come back. No insult. No baiting. Just nothing. It scared me. Had I broken him? I had. I had broken my little brother.

“Bas—”

“It’s just bruises.” He muttered, walking away from me. “I’m going to bed.”

I stood there for a few minutes, after I heard his bedroom door close. Maybe I wasn’t better than the old bastard. Or worse, I was becoming like our father after mom died. I used to save Bastion from being hit. Now I was the one hitting him.

CHAPTER 28

Madeline

“That’s three shipments.” Running my fingers through my hair, fighting a headache. “Fifteen trucks. That isn’t random. Someone is hijacking them and sending a message.”

A message that was directed at me. My stomach twisted again. “Is there still no word on who?”

Sitting in the back seat of my Uncle Cole’s blacked out sedan. Twenty past four in the morning.

“We just have to wait for the guns to flood the market or watch who suddenly has more weapon power.” He was calmer tonight. Perhaps it was just exhaustion.

“Our relationship with the buyers was fragile before we lost their shipment twice.” Dropping my head back against the headrest. “It is not an option to tell him we have

lost it again. I've negotiated until the end of the month. We will have to wear the cost, buy up the market. Those guns were paid in full."

He touched my leg. "Maddy, when was the last time you slept? You're losing that spark we love."

Turning to look out the window. "It's hard to sleep, knowing someone is purposely making me look stupid."

My uncle's driver pulled to a stop at the top of Vince's driveway. Two hours we drove around talking. No closer to a conclusion.

"Maddy, this isn't the first time our guns have been taken. Nor will it be the last time someone will want to challenge you. Normally you see that, normally you expect people to underestimate you. You thrive on proving them wrong."

Dropping my head to the side to look at him. My vision was blurry for a moment before I blinked.

"So, I've asked Nathaniel to fly in and take over for a few weeks. Give you a break."

I groaned, loudly. Rolling my eyes. It took all my self-control to not throw a tantrum.

"A leader is only as good as their self-awareness. You need a break and we're enforcing it."

This would be the second time the family had stood me down. Immediately, I felt like a failure.

"Fine but, I deal with the buyer at the end of the month." I want to look that man in the eye and apologize to him, but more importantly, I needed to see if he was the one

stealing them.

“Can you at least tell Nathaniel no bright colored shirts and bold patterns? There is never a reason to wear fluorescent shirts with a brown business suit.” I could gag just at the memory.

He unlocked the compartment, handing me my phone. “Goodnight Maddy,”

“Goodnight uncle,” I closed the car door, yawning. Like normal, he didn’t pull away until I was inside.

Even though the chances of anything happening to me here was non existent.

The security at the Crow's gated compound was unlike anything else.

I left the front door unlocked. Walking upstairs. At least the bedroom lights were off. Opening the door softly. Thank God,he was asleep. I was starting to get worried that my routine was affecting him.

It had been over a week since Vinces fight with Bastion, and he still didn’t seem any better.

Glancing at the cigarettes on the bedside table. I hated to admit I needed one. Was I becoming a smoker? Pouting, I climbed onto the bed next to Vince. Laying on top of the blankets.

Maybe my uncle was right. I needed a break.

I didn’t even have the energy to get undressed. Sleeping fully clothed like a psychopath. God, what could I justify next?

The doorbell rang for the third time.

I walked downstairs, still dressed in last night's clothes.

Why did Vince suddenly decide to get the doorbell fixed this week? Knocking was easier to sleep through.

I opened the door to see Bastion.

“Did I wake you?” he frowned.

Taken back by Bastion's injuries. When Vince said he hit him, I thought once. Not this. Geez. No wonder Vince was still punishing himself.

“Um yeah.” I opened the door fully for him. “But it's okay.”

Bastion walked in, still looking at me. “Don't take this the wrong way, Maddy, but are you okay? You look?—”

“Awful?” I finished his sentence.

He followed me into the kitchen. I really needed a drink and painkillers.

“So, is everything okay?” he asked.

I opened the fridge. Looking for sugar free juice. Only there wasn't any. So, I settled for a bottle of water. “Just family stuff. Do you want one?”

He shook his head, looking around the kitchen. Something was wrong with him.

“So, what can I help you with?” I asked, twisting the cap off the water bottle.

“Is Vince home?”

Odd question. “So you came to see Vince?” They hadn’t spoken in over a week since the fight.

He nodded.

He was lying to me. Interesting. “Vince is at the office and doing the site visits.” Which Bastion would know. Vince kept the same days every month that he checked in with the construction sites.

“Right. I forgot.” he leaned back against the kitchen island.

Fighting exhaustion and a headache, I walked to the cupboard, getting painkillers. “Is there something you want to ask me, Bastion?”

“Why do you stay?”

I frowned, opening the tablets. “Stay with Vince?” I glanced at him.

“You could have any guy. I’d say all of them would treat you better. So why him?”

I never asked what the fight was over. Why am I getting the feeling it has something to do with me?

“That’s not your question, though, is it?” I turned around, crossing my arms.

“Always straight to the point, aren’t you?” He sighed, “are you going to leave him Maddy?”

This felt like a fever dream. Why would Bastion suddenly be concerned about me leaving Vince? Did he forget our arranged marriage, or the fact their family crest is tattooed on my back.

“Why would I leave him?” Perhaps that was the better question.

“If you sleep with other men. What happens if you fall in love with one of them?”

“Did he tell you about the agreement?”

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He arched his eyebrows, nodding.

“Falling in love is easy, staying in love with someone. That’s harder.” Sighing, I ran my fingers through my hair. “There are always reasons to leave. People change. The person you fell in love with today might be harder to love in a few years.”

I tied my hair up.

“I love Vince. And I know he will always love me differently. But I’ve made peace with that.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “Because he is everything to me.” Taking the painkillers and put the water down. “Now Bas, will you tell me what’s really going on?”

“I’m worried that my brother's life depends on you being a part of his. What happens if you leave, or he screws up, which he does, regularly. And then you leave him. Or you fall in love with one of your fuck boys?—”

“Bas, stop.” Grabbing his arms, I stood in front of him. “You’re over thinking this.”

This felt like a child worried their parents were going to split up.

“You’re right. Vince will screw up. So will I. And when it happens, we’ll talk it through. That won’t change. The only time I will leave him is if I die. Otherwise, I’ll be here. Friend, wife, whatever.” I smiled, “Though, even if I die, I could see myself

haunting him. You know. For fun.”

That caused Bas to smile. I never thought I’d miss seeing it.

“Now, are you okay?” I touched his cheek lightly, trying to inspect the damage without hurting him. “Vince didn’t say it was this bad. But it makes sense. I’ve never seen him so upset.”

He sighed, “I’m fine. I sort of deserved it.”

“I doubt that.” Lowering my hand. “Have you two spoken since?” By his expression, I would take it as a no.

“Sorry,” he looked away from me.

“For?”

“For coming here, waking you up, demanding answers to questions that I shouldn’t ask.” He looked guilty all of a sudden. “Maybe I’m the one with the problem.”

“God forbid you ask a question. You know, I still don’t get that in your family. Why is asking a direct question so hard?” Holding my temples for a moment.

He moved to hug me, but I stepped back.

“I am in no fit state to be touched. I committed a crime last night. I slept in these clothes.” I was still disgusted by my own actions. “Like a psychopath. I slept fully clothed.” Making sure he understood, “When I find out who is purposely ruining my life, they will get pay back for this. Bastion. I even nearly lit my own cigarette.”

He grinned. Perhaps the only good thing to come from me sleeping fully clothed was

seeing Bastion back to his normal self.

I woke up to the feeling of Vince stroking my back. I wasn't even sure when I had fallen asleep. His fingers moved through my hair before slowly running down my back again.

"I'm sorry," I opened my eyes, rolling on to my back. How long had I been sleeping on him? "You should have woken me." I frowned when seeing his expression. "What's wrong?"

"They're working you in to the ground." He slowly traced my cheek. "It really pisses me off that they think this is okay."

"They stood me down," I stretched my arms, "Nathaniel took over as of this morning."

"Really, cause your phone hasn't stopped."

I turned my head on his leg and reached for my phone off the coffee table.

"Fuck. I shouldn't have said anything. Don't call them back. Please."

I looked at the number of calls. "Something must have happened."

"Something always has happened." His jaw tightened. "Please. Madeline. Don't call them back."

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“I’m sorry.” I sat up, calling Nate back. To have this amount of miss calls from every one of them. That wasn’t normal.

“Where the fuck have you been?”

“Um. Uncle Cole said you were taking over, so I um,” I moved away from the couch to make sure Vince didn’t hear our conversation. He barely tolerated my family at the best of times. “I was asleep. Is everything okay?”

“I found out who took our guns.”

“Really, who?”

“Marcel Crow. Making some fucking point about business, we apparently costed him.”

“Oh.” I nervously glanced at Vince before walking into the kitchen. “Well, I guess we can organize a sit down.”

“No. Fuck that. He has wasted my time. Costed us money. So, I made my own fucking point.”

The one time I don’t answer my phone. “Nate. Please tell me you haven’t already reacted?”

“They costed us three shipments. What kind of man does it make me look like if I let that go unanswered?”

“A man that doesn’t let his ego blind his decisions.” Holding the side of my head, “What did you do?”

“I blew up their shipment containers. Apparently, Marcel and his wife were on the property at the time?—”

“Are they okay? Please tell me you didn’t kill one of them?” I moved further through the house, trying to put as much distance between Vince and I. “Please tell me that they are okay?”

“Do you remember what family you belong to? I’m starting to think you’re on their side.”

“There are no sides.” Nervously I looked around the corner. “Answer my question, please.”

“You know this whole thing started because of you.”

I rolled my eyes. I refused to entertain this theory again. “Nathanial. Answer my question.”

“You’ll be happy to know. They are both alive. But his wife did go into early labor.”

For a moment, it felt as if the whole room had started moving. “Is she okay? What about the baby?”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know, and I don’t care.”

“You need to care.” I glanced down the hall. “Their grandfather is a fucking psychopath. If something has happened to his first great grandchild, he will lose it.”

A long silence followed.

“Nate, you need to find out if they are okay.”

“I already told you. I don’t care. If you’re really that concerned about his great grandchildren. Then you can get on your back and give him one. Because your loyalty right now. Is really fucking clear to me.”

He ended the call. Of all nights for my cousin to get blinded by his own pride. I tied my hair up, walking back down to the lounge.

“I have to go.”

Vince was still sitting on the couch. “What a fucking surprise.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Madeline. I’m over this. I am over them always calling you and expecting you to clean up?—”

“It’s my job!” I threw my hands up. “And it’s my family. You never hear me complaining about yours.”

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“Mine doesn’t drag me from our bed in the early hours of the morning.”

“Yes, they do Vince.” I put my runners on. I didn’t even have time to waste by walking slow. “I just don’t make a big deal about it.”

“Which one of them fucked up tonight? What state are you suddenly expected to rush to?”

“I’m not fighting with you.” I walked back into the kitchen, looking for my car keys. “I understand you’re frustrated, and I’m sorry. We will talk about this.” I turned around, not even surprised to see he had followed me. “But I can’t right now.”

I went up on my toes and kissed him. “I am sorry.”

Before I could step away from him, he pulled me back to him. Kissing me harder.

“I promise. When I get back, we will talk about it.” I kissed him one more time and left. Praying to a higher power that Marcel’s wife and their baby were okay.

CHAPTER 29

Vince

“My first great grandchild is dead.” Damius looked at Marcel. “An unforgiveable loss.”

For the first time since we were teenagers, I felt sorry for Marcel. Emmie and him

had been trying for years to get pregnant. I respected all my cousins wives. But she was always the sweetest.

Seeing Marcel, this upset, got under my skin. We might fight behind closed doors, but when it came to the rest of the world. I'd stand in front of a bullet for him, which technically, I had done. Twice.

“I have requested that the family is to come here, face the consequences directly.” Damius cleared his throat and looked down at the ground. “We shall handle this as a family.” He gripped Marcel's shoulder.

The table behind Damius was setup with torture devices.

It was going to be a long fucking night.

The doors opened.

Madeline. Why was she here?

Looking from her to her uncles and cousins.

Her family is responsible.Fuck.

The satisfaction sparked in Damius's eyes as he watched my reaction.

Nikolai stepped to my side; I could feel his hand ready to grab me. I wasn't fucking stupid.

The tightness in my chest, as the formal introductions, finally ended.

“A loss of my first great grandchild, that was named in, my Honor.” Damius stepped

forward. “In some ways, an extension of myself was killed by incompetency.”

He slowly walked in front of them, only to tap his watch twice in front of Nathaniel, marking him for execution.

But Madeline was standing right beside him.

Marcel shifted. Ready. Had he read the mark as her cousin, or her? That twitch in his jaw.

Fuck it.

Damius stepped out of the way, and I moved forward. Trying to make it as quick as possible, but Madeline still reached for his hand as I pulled the trigger.

His body hit the ground. Followed by a long silence.

“Zeke, you are lucky to have another son.” Damius stood in front of him.

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I held my gun tighter, stopping myself from wiping his blood off her face.

“Vincent,”

What the fuck now? I dragged my eyes off Madeline. To look at Damius.

I hadn't seen that look since I was a teenager. The look he used to get when he had power over me.

“In honor of your cousin's first son. Marco shall be reminded of his responsibility to control his family.”

Marco knew exactly what Damius meant, rolling up his sleeve.

First, I executed her favorite cousin. Now I'm to remove her fathers hand.

This night would only end with her hating me.

I might as well get it the fuck over with. I reached for the blade off the table.

“A full removal, Vincent,” Damius stopped me, gesturing to the electric saw beside it. I should have known by the lineup.

He wanted her to be traumatized when she looked at me.

Cutting through the bones always took longer. I picked up the power saw. Nikolai moved to my side. He could hide it from her view, but she wasn't deaf.

“Unfortunate circumstances to meet my soon to be granddaughter.”

My blood ran cold. All these years, I had kept him away from her. If he thought, I would let him rape and hurt her.

He had underestimated me.

That same sickening feeling runs through me, remembering his promise. What is mine. Would always be his.

For the first time in years that night and what he did to that woman replayed through my mind. Him ordering me to execute her was painless compared to what he did.

“Madeline, come here.” Damius tapped the table. “Let me see you.”

I cracked my neck.

Of all the ways I could die. Not once had I considered it to be at the hands of my cousins.

“What a beautiful little pet for my strongest crow.” He wiped the blood from her cheek, smearing it in her hair. “Oh, she is stunning. I can see why Vincent made such an effort to get you for his own.” he slowly turned to look at me, only then to drag a look at my cousins.

“Nikolai, step aside. Madeline will hold her father’s arm.” He took her hand, kissing the back of her palm. “Go to your fiancé’s side. Remind your father whose family you belong to.”

She would never look at me the same after this. His natural reaction would be to fight. She wouldn’t have the strength to hold him.

She stood beside me, her hand shaking as she held his wrist. Gently taking her hand, I moved it further up his arm, only to then cover her hand with mine.

A clean cut would heal better if he got the right care. As I cut through his flesh. She flinched, physically shaking, as he fought to get out of our grip.

Her hand was trapped under mine as I stopped him. The blood spraying across us, I tried to block it from her, but between the saw, him fighting and her shaking. I couldn't stop the blood from getting her.

His screaming only stopped when he passed out. Sadly, for him, it wouldn't be permanent. The pain would still be there in the morning.

Zeke and Felix carried Marco to the car.

Due to the disrespect. Damius ordered for the body to be tied to the back of their car and dragged home.

She stood beside me, watching Marcel tie the rope around her cousin's neck, before securing his body to their car.

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The longer I stared at the car, the more fear I had. What if she got in that car and I never saw her again?

“I’ll follow, do the honors of cutting him free for the widow.” Marcel pulled on the rope one more time, checking it was secure.

Zeke just stared at him. No emotion. No reaction.

I didn’t even blame my cousin. If it had been Madeline, and she was put in harm’s way. I’d do the same fucking thing. Though I would have made his death slower. I robbed Marcel of that. So, I knew this was his way of getting his revenge.

I gently touched her arm. She froze, but didn’t pull away. That was something.

“Madeli—”

“Don’t touch me.” she shoved my hand away and walked to the car.

CHAPTER 30

Madeline

Sitting on the stairs. The room blurred for a moment. Until I blinked. “I tried. I really tried.” I wiped my eyes again. “He just wouldn’t listen.”

My mom’s crying got louder, followed by long, drawn-out screams.

Uncle Zeke sat next to me. “Marco was a stubborn man, Maddy. It’s just who he was.”

Who he was.

I nodded, the room instantly blurry again.

The front door opened and closed. Followed by the voices of Uncle Cole and Uncle Felix. Immediately, Mom's crying got louder.

“Where is she!”

A rush of fear ran through me as I looked back at her. Standing at the top of the stairs with something in her hand.

“Dead. My husband is dead because of you.”

I just managed to cover my head before she threw an ornament at me. The white porcelain shattering on the wooden stairs.

She isn’t rational. My hand was shaking as I grabbed the rail, pulling myself up. I had to give her space. I walked down the rest of the stairs, but before I made it to the hallway, I heard her behind me.

“Disappointing, ungrateful bitch,” she threw a framed photo off the wall at me. “This is your fault for bringing that crazy fucking family into our lives!” I pushed back against the wall as she threw one framed photo after another onto the ground in front of me. Glass shattered everywhere.

“I’m sorr?—”

She grabbed my hair. “Look at them, fucking look at them!” shoving my face against the glass frame, “Nathanial. Dead. Diana. Dead. My husband. Dead.”

“I’m...I’m?—”

“Get out of my house.” I stumbled, as she shoved me, “Get out of my fucking house!”

I nodded, wiping my eyes and walking over the broken glass. Before I could get the keys off the table, she grabbed them.

“You’re no fucking daughter of mine. Understand. I have no children!”

Shaking, I nodded. Fuck it. I would walk. Where I would go, I had no idea. I opened the front door, only for her to slam it shut before I could step out.

“Selfish bitch. A selfish fucking bitch. So desperate for any fucking attention.”

“I’m sorry, I’m?—”

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Opening the front door, she threw my car keys into the garden. “Go on then. Fuck off. Go crawl back to that psychopath. Like the pathetic, desperate, fucking slut you are.” She pushed me, “I said get out of my house!”

Physically trembling as she slammed the door in my face. I stared down at my bare feet. My heart was racing faster. Where had she thrown my keys? I had taken one step when the door opened again.

“Don’t you dare fucking look for them!”

I stumbled down the front step.

“You aren’t taking it. My husband paid for it. My dead husband. Get off my property. Get off my property!”

Slipping on the wet steps before I started walking up the driveway, her screaming somehow still as loud.

I had no phone. No money. For fucks sake. I wasn’t even dressed. I typed the code into the front gate. But it wouldn’t open. Fuck. I couldn’t see through all the tears.

I heard her screaming again.

Oh fuck. She’s coming.

I accidentally typed the wrong code in again. Triggering a five-minute shut down.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m trying!” I yelled while sobbing. She grabbed my arm, screaming, and dragging me back to the house.

CHAPTER 31

Madeline

It was after midnight, but because of the time difference; I hadn’t slept. Since arriving at the Crow's family estate on their island.

I stood in the shadows of the lounge room, watching as two women tried to unlock the glass sliding door.

“Why is it locked?”

“Seriously, Vivi? Probably because of our family.”

I flicked the foyer lights on. Immediately, both women looked at me.

The one who had been picking the lock a second ago started to wave at me. “She looks so scared,”

“Of course she is scared. You’re trying to break into her villa.”

“Hi! We’re Vincent's cousins,” the girl pointed between them. “We. Are. Not. Going. To. Hurt. You. We brought drinks!”

The other woman raised two bottles. “I’m pretty sure she speaks English, Vivi,”

“Then why isn’t she coming?” she tapped the window, waving at me to come to them. “She’s so tiny and cute. She looks like a doll.”

“How has Vincent not crushed her by accident?”

I slide the lock across, unlocking the door.

“Finally!” One woman hugged me as soon as she stepped in.

“Vivi, you’re scaring her.”

“Oh, am I?” She pulled back, holding my shoulders. “I’m Vivienne, but everyone calls me Vivi. Sorry. I’m a hugger.”

The other woman shoved her off me. “And sometimes she is very obnoxious. I’m Evelyn. Harrison’s wife.”

“Oh, good point,” Vivi stepped back in front of me, “Jamison is mine. Have you met them?”

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I slowly shook my head.

“That is so weird, my jamjam said he met you.” She turned around, walking back to the door. “Emmie, get in here already! She’s so tiny and cute! Just like a doll!”

“I am sorry about her,” Evelyn turned the lounge room light on. “Trust me, you’ll get used to it.”

I nodded. Suddenly my nerves were eating at me very quickly.

“You are so adorable.” Vivienne tapped my head, walking past me. “How has Vincent not broken you?”

“Vivi, stop touching her,”

“Sorry,” she smiled at me.

They both walked to the couch, sitting down.

“Um, did you want a glass?” I asked as they opened the bottle.

“No, sit. I want to hear everything about you and Vincent. He is so obsessed with you.” Vivienne tapped the couch next to her.

I sat in the armchair across from them. I felt so out of my depth. Men, I could handle. I dealt with men every day of my life. Women, though. I only had my mother. I didn’t even have a relationship with my aunts. Not really.

“We were just friends.”

“That’s so cute,” Vivi sighed, “Jamjam and I weren’t friends. I hated him. He was such a big grump.”

Evelyn nodded. “I met Harrison after he killed my parents.”

My eyes widened.

“Oh, it gets better,” Vivi nudged her, “Tell her the rest of it.”

“He arrived at my wedding, killed my fiancé. Then he turned around to the church and announced our engagement.” She shook her head, “Crows. They are so fucking crazy. But they are our crazy, you know.” She smiled, offering me the bottle.

I shook my head. If I broke my mother’s fast, the consequences wouldn’t be worth it.

“Complete psychos.” Vivienne nodded. “Jamjam started a war for my attention after I ended our merger and went with another family.”

“A family that doesn’t exist now.” Evelyn winked at me.

“I ignored him. Until he broke into my room,”

Evelyn waved her hands. “It gets better. Tell her why he broke in.”

“He missed me calling him Jamjam,” she sighed, clearly very much in love with this man.

“Jamison Crow, as in Marcel Crows, brother?” I asked. Surely, she wasn’t talking about that beast of a man that I watched help tie my cousin's body to the back of my

car.

“That’s my Jamjam.” She nodded, looking back at the glass door. “Why isn’t Emmie coming in? Eve, can you go get her?”

“Emmeline, as in Marcel’s wife?” I asked. They both nodded. Perhaps they hadn’t told them what happened.

I walked towards the sliding door. The night air was refreshing. Sure enough, a woman sat on the porch steps, staring at the tree line.

“Emmeline,”

She looked over her shoulder, immediately standing up. “I’m sorry. I was coming, I just.” She locked her phone walking towards me. “Marcel and I are still trying to think of the right thing to do.”

The right thing to do. I frowned, not understanding what she meant.

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“Marcel set up a weekly delivery of flowers, but I told him after the funeral you won’t want flowers. Let alone weekly deliveries. And um, I bailed up Vincent, he wouldn’t tell me anything about you.” She rocked back and forth on her feet, crossing her arms. “I swear Marcel and I will earn your forgiveness. We can’t have family hating us.”

The situation was messy. They lost their baby. The hardest thing in our world is accepting the grief and blood that seemed to connect us all together.

“I’m sure in time we will figure it out.” I paused, “and I am sorry for your loss.”

She smiled, taking a step towards me. “Can I hug you? I won’t just force myself on you. I’m sure Vee has.”

I stared at her open arms for a moment. I really struggled with being touched. After months and months of flinching every time, someone moved their hands. But I didn’t want to offend her. So I nodded.

Though I was grateful, it was quick.

“I haven’t missed the story about Vincent and you, have I?”

“No story. We were just friends.” I could hear how empty my voice had gotten over the months. But I just didn’t have the energy to put on a show. And now being at the Crow’s estate on their island was making it all suddenly real.

Tomorrow I’d be marrying Vince. Hell. Tomorrow night, these women would be

watching him fuck me. Everything about their family was so fucking twisted.

For the first time, I regretted meeting him. I should have just left my car in that car park. If I had married Noah, none of it would have happened. Dad would still be here. Or at least if he was to die, it wouldn't have been my fault.

“Emmie!” Vivienne opened her arms for her. I watched as the three women took over the couch. They were clearly very close. “We were just telling Maddy how we met the boys. So, we can be very nosy and ask about her and our Vincent.”

All three of them looked at me. “Nothing to know. We were friends.” I had lost track of how many times I had said that.

“Harris and I have a theory.” Evelyn sat up on her knees. “You two have been secretly dating for years.”

I shook my head, “We haven't. Just friends.”

“So you two haven't had sex?” Vivienne tilted her head, very closely watching my reaction. I had a feeling this woman was a human lie detector.

“No.”

The three of them shared a look.

“Probably a good thing, considering.” Evelyn added.

“Considering what?” I sat back down across from them.

“Crows can't date.”

“They do. Vince’s brothers all date” I had seen his brothers with multiple women. Roman was engaged to Ava before she died. And I swore Bastion and Luca had a new woman every month. Sometimes the same woman. Though, I wasn’t sure if their dates were always aware of that.

“No, Roman, Bastion and Luca date. They answer to Vincent and Nikolai. All the other crows follow the full oath.”

“The full oath?” I asked.

“They can date, but their woman is considered prey. So they have to be prepared to share, if the handler calls for it. Which is Damius, so.” She shrugged. “No way in hell that sick bastard wouldn’t lay you out for all of them.”

“But if the Crow is married, they can choose not to participate.” Vivienne added, seeming slightly uneasy. “I have a very set rule with Jamjam about it.”

“Our family works by all of us having as many children as possible. It stops any Crow from settling outside of the oath. Nothing like we might all rip your girlfriend apart to keep them focused on business and only settling with their pet.” Evelyn added, “and no one can touch you once you are considered a pet.”

This twisted, fucked up family. I stared at them as they used words in contexts that should be concerning, not endearing. But the way the three of them lit up at the word pet.

“So why are Vince’s brothers different?” If anything, that just made less sense. All of his cousins answered to their grandfather after their parents died.

Damius wasn’t capable of any emotion, let alone deserved anyone to care about him. But if what happened to him, happened to anyone else. I would feel sorry for him.

Losing his six sons, their wives, his five brothers and their wives. Basically, two generations wiped out at once. Vince's father might have won that war, but he still died, even if it was at his own hand.

“They did some type of deal and got the younger kids. It isn't spoken about. The father is always the handler, and well, after their dad's suicide. They should have all answered to Damius.” Vivienne handed me the bottle again.

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“No. I’m fine.”

“Anyway, that might be why Vince never touched you.” She shrugged. “Well, it all worked out in the end.”

“I’m not even sure how I ended up here. Now everything feels...” I stopped. Instead, I shrugged. Like normal, I found myself lost for words.

“Now that sounds like the foundation of every successful crow's marriage.” Emmeline laughed. "Are you nervous about tomorrow? I would do anything to do it again.”

“It was so hot,” Evelyn sighed, leaning back on the couch, “that look in his eyes when he did it. It still gets me.”

“I beg Jamjam every anniversary to cut me. Just to get that look back.”

“Take our advice, enjoy the claiming ritual. You only get it once.”

Vivienne nodded with this wishful look. “Even reenactments aren’t the same.”

“The claiming ritual.” I repeated, just to make sure I had heard them right. “Where he cuts me and then everyone watches us have sex?” Why would I ever want to reenact that? Let alone enjoy it.

“That was my reaction, too. Heck, it is everyone’s reaction. Until after it. And as for everyone in the room, you won’t notice us. You will be way too focused on your

husband.”

My stomach twisted. They would be in the room. Their husbands would be in the room. Damius. Suddenly I felt sick again, and this time it wasn't from lack of food.

Everything about Vince's family was so fucking twisted. My only friend and, of course, he had to be from one of the most psychotic bloodlines.

CHAPTER 32

Vince

Every message and call went unanswered. Her family had the ten blocks around their house locked down. Any chance of getting to her would only bring attention.

After Nathaniels' funeral, her family disappeared from the public eye.

For over four years, I had managed to keep Damius uninterested in Madeline. Hiding her in plain sight. Now he knew, and if I ended our merger, it would only bring his focus to her more.

Fixing my cufflinks. I had no idea if I picked the ones she wanted.

“Apparently, she is here, so that is something.” Bastion fixed his tie, offering me another drink, “At least you know she isn't going to stand you up at the altar.”

Her sudden disappearance hadn't just affected me. It had affected my siblings. She had become a ghost.

For over two months, she hadn't been seen. Luca looked for her at the hotel openings. Bastion did the same thing at the new nightclub. Rome won't admit it, but I knew he

was putting off buying that property to get Madeline's opinion.

And then there was Nikolai, who had a sudden interest in surveillance. Desperate to get information on her welfare.

“Well, her family has requested that we stay away from the bridal room.” Cecilia closed the door, walking in, “So unfair, as if Maddy would hold what you lot did to her, against me.”

I focused on forcing the cufflink through the fabric.

“What did you guys do to her, again?” Sofia asked. “Is this about her cousin?”

“Girls, another topic.” Nikolai spoke over them.

Over a thousand people waited out there, and most knew exactly what had happened. This merger now was more focused on restoring peace between the two families.

After I, the psycho Crow tried to drown her in her cousin's blood. The facts had blurred over the months of people retelling the story.

But the image of her covered in her father's blood hadn't left my mind. Every time I closed my eyes. I saw her.

“Alright, let's get this the fuck over with.” Finishing the drink bastion gave me.

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I stepped out of the room. The ceremony would take over two hours. Followed by the reception.

Then everyone else fucked off.

All the Crows will relocate to the ballroom and the rituals started.

I'd never liked the idea of being locked in a house after the wedding. Now. I was grateful.

She couldn't be a ghost when we were locked in the same building together for five days.

Finally, I would take her home. And I'd spend the rest of my life earning her forgiveness.

As expected, the overly large gothic church was decorated following traditions.

The lighting, the large displays of red and black roses. Every small detail was dictated according to the Crow's Oath.

From where I stood, it was just a sea of people.

Hundreds of people in the first section of seating. Every living Crow in attendance.

My stomach twisted again. Had she got the rest of the crest finished?

I glared at the tattoo artists, who were both waiting out of view of the guests. The bitch hadn't returned one of my calls. I'd even gone to her parlor multiple times, only to find it always closed.

The music changed, and so did my attention.

Turning to look as she walked down the aisle. Which was too fucking long.

Madeline was breathtakingly beautiful.

Each step she took closer to me; I found it easier to breathe again.

She actually came.

Though it was painfully obvious Marco hadn't attended.

Now to get all these fucking traditions done. The tattoos, the vows, reception and finally the rituals.

Even though she hadn't looked at me, it was the happiest I had been in months.

Every dish placed in front of my wife left the table untouched. Every item on the menu was her favorite. I'd made sure of it. Perhaps it was nerves.

The idea of what followed later made her nervous months ago.

I watched my wife from across the room.

All Crow weddings had one rule that every guest was to follow. And I was sure everyone from her side was determined to break it.

I left my drink at the bar and walked towards them.

A man I sure as fuck didn't know stepped closer to her, his hand hovering.

At this point, I would have to follow her around all night reminding them, no one is to touch my bride.

He leaned in, ready to hug her.

“Madeline.”

Her eyes widened, but she didn't look at me. Swiping his hand away, before stepping back.

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“Of course he is possessive.” He grunted, shoving his hands in his pockets. “That one is fucking psychotic.” He walked away. Not having the guts to say that sentence to my face.

Her tattoo was hours old.

And they considered me unreasonable, for making sure they kept their filthy unclean hands away from her.

“Sorry,” she forced a smile. She still hadn’t looked at me, and it really bothered me.

Her lack of personality around me was obvious. And fucking painful to experience.

The same feeling consumed me as I looked at her tattoo. She had got the crest finished without me.

I had spent the whole day staring at her and it was concerning to see her this thin.

Was she about to pass out? The lack of color on her face.

“Did you eat something?” I took a step closer to her. She looked sick. It took all my self-control not to reach for her. I had made sure only to touch her when I had to.

“I can’t,” she looked around the room, “I was sewn into this dress. Mom really had her heart set on it.”

I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not.

She touched her stomach. “It’s okay. It’s only day three of the fast. I’ve done longer.”

What was that supposed to do? Reassure me? No need to worry. My wife has starved for longer than three fucking days.

“Come with me.”

“Did I miss greeting someone?”

“No Madeline, you need to eat or drink something. I can’t have you passing out later.”

She stared expressionless across the room. “Oh. Okay.”

CHAPTER 33

Madeline

I watched as some of the most powerful and feared men in the world knelt before me, vowing to respect, honor, and protect me.

They kissed my hands. Their wives kissed my cheeks. Vince’s brothers kissed the inside of my wrists.

And all of them cut themselves, spilling blood on my dress.

Each family member did the exact same thing, then they stood to the side.

The large hall was beautifully decorated. Everything was perfectly placed and thought out, even the low music.

Though, the bed on the raised platform behind me was becoming harder and harder to ignore.

Especially when Vince was the last to stand in front of me.

The lights noticeably dimmed as he took his jacket off, followed by his shirt.

My blood rushed as he stepped forward, bringing the knife to the front of my dress.

I focused on the warmth of his fingers as he pulled the dress slightly away from me, before the knife sliced through the fabric.

With each rip, it left me more vulnerable. Until I stood completely naked in front of him. No way to cover myself. No way to hide.

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Placing the knife in his palm, he sliced his hand open. While repeating the oath.

He looked hypnotized, drunk on possession, as he smeared a bloody circle in the center of my chest over my heart.

Claiming me as his.

Marking me with the blood of a crow.

He ran his tongue over his bottom lip, slowly looking me up and down. As he undid his belt.

Suddenly, all I felt were the eyes of his family. Knowing his brothers were somewhere in this hall. I stared at his tattooed chest, fighting myself to not look around the room.

He held my waist, moving me back to the bed. Where was Damius? How close was he?

As Vince laid me down on the bed, spreading my legs around him. Suddenly, I could feel everyone watching us.

Just as I looked away, he grabbed my chin. "Eyes on me." Considering he wrapped my hand around the end of the knife; he had my attention.

He placed the knife on his chest, over his heart. Covering my hand with his, he pushed the blade in. Slowly, he helped me guide the cut across his heart. Deep

enough to leave a scar. Shallow enough to heal on its own.

Instead of being repulsed by his blood, I couldn't look away.

He took the knife from me, kissing the back of my hand. The cold blade against my palm. My heart raced faster as he looked at me, slowly slicing my palm.

Gently, he kissed my knuckles before placing my bloody hand over the cut on his heart. And I couldn't look away.

Not even as he sliced my other hand. Or his own.

All I could focus on was the warmth of his skin, the feeling of his heart beating under my hand. He laid my arm above my head.

I felt the cold blade at my chest, in the center of the bloody circle he had smeared earlier.

My breathing suddenly became sharper as the blade pierced my skin. It hurt. But it wasn't painful, just like the feeling of the satin sheets against my fresh tattoo. It seemed to just feed this sudden need I had for him.

That drunken look of possession in his eyes, as he placed his bloody hand on my chest, covering my cut.

He slowly lowered over me, holding my hand above my head. "You look so fucking good as mine." He kissed me, silencing the moan from my mouth as he took me with no warning.

"They can watch me fuck you. They don't get to hear you." He bites my bottom lip.

I wasn't even sure how he managed it, but my focus was only on him. His hand moved to my hip. Holding me down as he fucked me hard and so fucking slow.

“Let them see how perfect my wife is.” He kissed just below my ear. “And how fucking good you take your husband's dick.”

He took my hand from his chest. Locking both my wrists above my head.

He wanted everyone to see.

So I didn't attempt to cover myself. Even when he let go of my wrists.

I arched my back, meeting his deep slow thrusts, making me tighten.

“You're doing so good, baby,” he whispered in my ear. “I'm so fucking proud of you.” I couldn't stop the moan, and his eyes widened threateningly. “Just two more minutes. You can keep quiet for me, can't you?”

I weakly nodded, clenching my teeth, and holding my mouth closed. But I needed more, and every sharp thrust was driving me closer

He slowed his pace. “See that? The room is getting darker.” I dug my nails into his shoulders. “Nearly there. You're doing so good.” I couldn't stop the moan; his whole body went tight. I wasn't sure if he did it on purpose, but his pace got harder and faster.

I couldn't stop myself. Not if he was going to fuck me like that. His mouth covered mine, silencing me.

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He was right, the room was getting darker.

Suddenly, it was pitch black.

I couldn't see him. I couldn't see anything.

He pulled out, flipping me over.

The blood rushing in my ears, suddenly deafening.

His arm wrapped around my waist, pulling me back to him.

“Are your eyes open, my love?” his voice so low and deep as he spoke in my ear.

“Yes,”

“Look straight ahead. Do you see that red light?”

I nodded, but then remembered he couldn't see me. “Yes.”

“When it is green, we're alone.” His fingers brushed my hair forward. “I'm going to rub your clit, and you're not to moan until it goes green.” He licked along my neck.

“You can do that for me. Show me how good my wife is, how well she listens.”

He had barely touched me, and I was melting back against his chest. I didn't even care that my back was sensitive because of the tattoo. The pain adding to the pleasure.

Seconds. I was so close within seconds.

“That’s it,” his hand went to my throat, “Now, I’m putting my dick back where it belongs.” I felt him between my legs. “Be quiet for me.”

As he pushed into me, stretching me. I wasn’t quiet, the moan so loud, it was near a scream as his hand covered my mouth, tasting our blood.

Everything was more intense.

“You’re doing so good,” he pulled and slowly pushing back in to me while rubbing me. “Your cumming aren’t you,” He groaned in my ear, “I can feel you baby, you’re strangling my dick.”

Squeezing his arm as I finished.

The red light flashed green.

“Finally,” he bit my shoulder, “let's put your pretty ass in the air, so I can really fuck my wife.” his hand ran over my breast. “You like the sound of that?”

“Yes,”

His deep low groan in my ear, “Be good for me, okay? It’s going to be rough, but you can take it, can’t you?”

Breathless and lightheaded as I bent over. I felt physically weak.

Fucking me so hard, I couldn’t think, just pushing back against him. Every hard sharp thrust driving me closer to finishing again.

“That’s it, let me hear you,”

My arms shook as I tried to hold myself up. Only to keep falling. Finally, I gave up. Falling into the mattress while he held my hips up.

“I can fill this pretty pussy up with cum, can’t I?”

“Yes, please.”

“Such good fucking manners.” His fingers dug into my hips. “Fuck,” his pace slowing as he finished in me.

I collapsed onto the bed as he pulled out. Relaxed. For the first time in months, my heart wasn’t racing out of fear.

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A wave of exhaustion rushed through me.

I felt him get off the bed. The lights slowly turned on. I hoped he hadn't lied earlier about the room being empty. A wave of fear went through me.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

What if they were all still here? What if Damius had stayed?

My heart is racing quicker. Just like that, I was rigid with fear, all relaxation and exhaustion gone.

Something soft and warm covered me.

"You did so well," his thumb traced my cheek, "I'm so fucking proud of you." He gently pushed my hair back from my face.

Keeping my eyes shut. I could feel the tears coming.

"Can I carry you to the room?"

"Are they... are they still here?" I bite my lip, holding the tears back.

"No, my sweetheart,"

Slowly, I opened my eyes to see him kneeling beside the bed. Warm tears rushing down my face.

“Did I hurt you?” he wiped the tears away, looking physically sick.

For him to hurt me, I would have to feel something. “No.”

He pulled the blanket over my shoulder. “Can I, um, please carry you to the room?”

His slight frown, the concern in his eyes. I could see he needed to touch me. His panic growing as he stared at me.

He was blurry for a moment until I blinked. “Okay.”

Carefully, he wrapped the blanket around me, lifting me from the bed.

It was considered an honor to be at the Crows Estate on their private island. Only opened to outsiders when they hosted a wedding.

But the thought of now being locked in one of the guest houses for five days. Really made me nervous.

CHAPTER 34

Madeline

They had actually locked us in the house. Even though it was a huge house, it felt like a cell. Five days. Five days locked in a house.

I moved on the couch. Fighting the anxiety attack. I hated the idea of being locked anywhere.

Especially after mom locked me in the garage the other week.

I wrapped the blanket around me tighter, staring at the fire.

Vince had insisted on washing the blood off me.

I was grateful he left me to shower by myself. I found crying in the shower the most convenient lately.

“Please, will you let me dry it?”

I looked up. I had no idea what he was talking about.

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“Your hair.” He added.

A drop of water ran down my back. I shrugged. I really couldn't care. If it made him feel better.

Something out of the corner of my eye caused me to flinch. I felt immediately stupid when I realized it was just the towel in his hand. Of course, he didn't miss my reaction.

I hated being so fucked up.

Very slowly, he started to dry my hair. A warm feeling flooded me. I wasn't sure when it happened. But I found peopletouching me just made the anxiety worse. I managed to sit still for a few more moments before I couldn't handle it any longer.

“Actually, um. I'll do it.” I took the towel off him and stood up, walking to the fire. “So, do we have to stay here for five days?”

The Crows weddings were usually always arranged. I assumed the mandatory lock in was to force the couples to get to know each other. But we already knew each other.

“Two weeks.”

I turned to look at him, not even able to hide my shock. “No. It is five days I read it.”

He tapped his lighter on the cigarette packet before walking around the couch and sitting down. That intense look always made me nervous.

“And the line after that says it is up to me.”

He was right. It said a minimum of five days or as long as the groom decides.

“And why would you keep us locked up longer than necessary?” I stopped drying my hair. “I have a life. Commitments outside of your fucked up family.”

I had always only spoken of his family with respect. I had only ever been understanding. But if he thought keeping me locked up on their fucked-up estate on their island would bring out the best in me, he was wrong.

“You mean our family, my love?”

“I don’t have time for this.” I repeated, “I have an overseas trip planned for nine days.”

He lit his cigarette and just stared at me. “Maybe now is a good time to have that conversation you promised me.”

The feeling of ice rushed through me. I had blocked that night out. I had managed to suppress most of that week. But now, it was all flooding back to me. Every sound, every scream, every tear. It all rushed back to me. My ear ringing after Vinceshot Nate. Dad's warm blood on my face. Melody screaming when she saw Nate's body being cut from the car.

Zeke's deep sobs when he found Aunty Diana had overdosed after Nate's funeral.

I stared at him for a few moments longer. I had made a mistake.

“I can’t do this.”

My vision went blurry. I took a step back. I had to get out of this house.

“Madeline, what are you doing?”

I pulled hard on the door handles. Nothing. Fuck it. I walked out of the room.

“Madeline,”

I ignored him walking down the hallway to the large glass doors.

“What are you doing?”

“I can’t be here. I can’t do this. I can’t.” I shook my head. My vision blurred. I pulled harder on the door handles

His arm wrapped around my waist, and I hit him. “I can’t do this!” I screamed. “Let go of me.”

I held my chest. Why was it suddenly hard to breathe? I pushed out of his arms, walking to the bedroom.

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Suddenly, I didn't care about his opinion on drugs. I could not survive this week or weeks with him in this house. Without drugs. I tipped my bag out over the bed. Where the fuck were my pills?

“What are you doing?”

Of course, he would follow me.

Opening my suitcase, I froze when I saw it was basically empty. No. Surely not. I opened the duffle bag. She took my stuff. Again. My crying became uncontrollable. Instantly, I felt defeated. Broken. Weak.

Holding my face, I sat down on the bed. The tears burning the cuts on my hands.

“My love, talk to me.” he brushed my hair back. I could feel him kneeling in front of me.

There was no point in us talking. I was too upset to be rational.

“I'm tired.” So very tired of everything. The constant fight. The constant fear. The never-ending grief and guilt eating at me “I'm just really fucking tired.”

I barely remember him cleaning the stuff off the bed or helping me into bed. But I was grateful he let me sleep on my own.

CHAPTER 35

Vince

All night she cried. All night. Until she eventually passed out. I forced myself to stay out here. I'd never felt so fucking helpless. And I hated it.

I lit another cigarette. It was the middle of the afternoon, and I wasn't sure if she was still asleep or if she was hiding in the bedroom from me. I'd let her hide from me, if it meant she wasn't crying.

Tossing the empty cigarette packet to the side, I looked up when I saw movement.

I'd never seen her like this. So fragile. So broken. That same helpless feeling rushed through me.

"Do you mind if I um borrow this shirt?" she rocked back and forth on her feet, staring at me.

She looked genuinely concerned that she would be in trouble for wearing it. For years, she wore my tops like they were her own.

I nodded.

"Thanks." She walked around the back of the couch. I noticed that last night too. This new habit she had of keeping furniture between us.

I took the cigarette from my mouth. "What happened to your arm?" I watched her at the kitchen island. Her back to me. But I could tell from here she was tense.

"An accident."

"Right. What happened?"

I couldn't think of one reason why Madeline would have a burn that size on her arm, or how it could be considered an accident. She hated cooking. She hated fires.

She shrugged, pretending to fake interest in the food buffet.

I got up. Walking towards her. If she was going to fake interest in that food, I was going to make sure she ate it. "So, why didn't your dad attend the wedding?"

I had never thought her father could hurt her. Each minute I spent with her, it was painfully fucking obvious he had punished her for what I had done to him. Which only made me want to take his other fucking hand.

"Oh. He died." She picked up a bread roll, looking at me.

Had I heard her wrong? "What?"

"He died. six weeks ago." She repeated. The lack of emotion really concerned me.

"How?"

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“He refused to get treatment after well, you know and um,” she stared at me, well, it felt like she stared through me. “He got a really bad infection that spread and, well, um, he died.”

She was serious. He had actually died.

I shook my head. “When was the funeral?” How had this all happened without me knowing? Without any of us knowing.

“There wasn’t one. Mom joined this new religion, and um,” she started ripping the bread apart, “She held a very private burial that just her and my uncles attended.”

“You didn’t attend his funeral?”

“No. I didn’t go.”

Because of me. They had punished her because of me. How could they hold her responsible? I removed his hand. He was the stubborn bastard that chose not to get it treated.

“Whose decision was it for you not to attend the funeral?”

“Mom took his death really hard.” she dropped the bread roll to a plate and pretended she was finished eating it. “But I didn’t mind. Two funerals were enough.”

“Two funerals?”

“Aunty Diana overdosed after Nate's wake.” She pushed the plate away from her.
“Zeke is pretty fucked up. Can I have that?”

I had no idea what she was pointing at. “What?”

“The vodka. Can I please have it?”

How many days had it been since she ate real food? I uncrossed my arms. “Sure, if you eat something first.”

Now that did cause her to look at me. Fuck. I had missed her. I'd take her annoyed or angry with me over nothing. I'd take anything over that blank, cold stare.

She placed a grape in her mouth, eating it and swallowing it.

“Good, keep going.”

“Only if we talk about something else.” Her fingers paused on the fruit. “Anything but my family, please.”

I nodded.

She looked instantly relieved, reaching for another grape.

“What happened to your engagement ring?” I had noticed it was missing yesterday.

“I lost it.”

Madeline was a terrible liar. But seeing she was seconds away from crying again, I wasn't going to push for the real answer.

Gently, I touched her cheek, forcing her to look up at me. "I'll get you another one," wiping her tears away. "Or we could get that one made again, if you liked it that much." I was trying to stop the crying, not make it worse.

Fuck. What did I do?

She shook her head. "It's fine. I don't need one. I have the wedding band."

Now she is turning down jewelry. Someone had broken my wife. "It's not fine with me. I want you to have one. So you'll have one."

"Can we talk about something else?" she closed her eyes. "Please?"

My luck so far, the next topic I picked would cause her to freak out again like last night. "Can I check your tattoo?"

She nodded. Pulling the shirt off, she turned. It looked fine. Maybe it was just the lack of sleep last night that fed my paranoia about it this morning.

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As much as I loved seeing my name on her back, I didn't want her to be uncomfortable. So, I helped her pull the shirt back on.

"How are your palms?" I reached for her hand, flipping it over. Tracing my thumb along side the cut.

"I'm not sure I'll ever be able to look at your brothers again."

I frowned, "Why?"

"Did you forget about last night? Where they all saw me naked while you fucked me?"

"Witnessing you becoming a crow is considered an honor in our family." I brushed her hair back. Red cheeks really did suit her. "They won't treat you differently."

Just the thought of her last night had my dick going hard.

"It doesn't bother you that all of them saw us? Every person with the last name Crow watched us?"

Technically, every male born crow, and their wife or husband.

"No. I can bet every couple in that hall was reliving the night they had taken the vow." Tracing my thumb along her bottom lip, "Because that is what I'll be doing when we attend the next one."

“You really enjoyed it, didn’t you?” she frowned, her lips slightly parted as if surprised.

I didn’t enjoy it.

“I fucking loved it. Claiming you was mine. Making you a crow.” My blood ran hot just thinking about it.

I wanted to consume her. The way she fucking consumed me for years. But for that to happen. I had to get her to look at me again.

“I’ll earn your forgiveness, and once I have it. I’ll never risk losing it.” Taking her hand, I kissed her knuckles. “Last night, you said you didn’t want to stay. I’ll make sure we’re gone by tonight. And I’ll give you your own room at our house.”

“You’d really do that?”

She could ask anything of me, and I’d somehow find a way to make it happen. I nodded. “I never want to see you that upset again, so. We’ll leave.”

“Isn’t that breaking an oath? You won’t get in trouble for it?”

I shrugged. “It should be fine.” Considering this oath was more meant to be for my benefit, I doubted I’d be held accountable.

Seeing that small smile on her face made the decision worth it.

“One more thing. You are not to touch yourself. Your pussy and clit, goes untouched.” My wife looks so good with flushed cheeks. “You’re mine. And you don’t have permission to touch. Understood?”

She nodded.

I kissed her forehead. "Let's take you home."

CHAPTER 36

Vince

It had been over a month since the wedding. Slowly, her personality was coming back. Some of the worse abuse is often not seen. She wouldn't tell me what had happened. Though it was clear someone had fucked with my wife's beautiful mind. Breaking her.

"Okay, I'm ready." She rushed down the stairs, holding her heels. "Sorry, I got distracted."

Fuck. How the hell was I going to keep my hands off her? Gently, I grabbed her hand, stopping her from rushing out the door.

"Vince, what are you doing? Aren't we already late?"

Lowering to my knee in front of her, taking the heels from her hand.

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It had taken me weeks to get Madeline interested in wearing heels again. Anything that used to make her happy, she wouldn't let herself have. Almost like a form of self-punishment.

She even refused to get her shoe collection from her mothers.

Taking her hand, I placed it on my shoulder, lifting her foot, slipping the heel on.

Tonight, she wouldn't be leaving my side. I'd make sure of it.

Pulling the straps behind her ankle, over her foot, under the heel and back around her ankle.

“Of course, you know how to tie them,” shaking her head, smiling. “Is there anything you don't know how to do?”

Standing back up, I took her hand. “What kind of husband would I be if I didn't know?”

That small frown on her face. God. I knew how to tie the straps of her heel. After years of watching her, do it. Why did the bare minimum impress her?

I opened the front door.

“You didn't tell me that they were waiting for us!” She whacked my chest, looking at the line of black wagons.

“They can wait.” I wrapped my arm around her waist and lifted her down the steps.

One of the guards opened the back door. Holding her hand as she stepped up. “Do not get out of the car until I get you.” I reached for the seatbelt.

“Wait. What?”

“Standard rule of the family. We never share a car when traveling together. Lowers the chances of us all being killed at once.”

We broke the rule once, and Cecilia nearly died. A few seconds later she would have been in the car with mom and not walking towards it when it blew up.

“I understand that,” she held my hand, “But I’d rather die in the car with you. Then watch it. So, if that’s how I die, so be it.”

She had a point, or perhaps when it came to her, I couldn’t say no.

I stared at her hand on mine. It was rare these days for her to touch me.

“Please Vince,”

The lack of power I have when she asks anything of me should be studied.

I nodded, closing the door and walking around the car. There was no doubt my brothers would bring this up later.

But an unwanted lecture from them would be easier to live through. Then knowing Madeline was two cars back, upset with me.

Another Casino, another opening. The same boring questions and scripted answers.

On nights like this, I was thankful that Bastion and Luca were good with people. If I was in charge of answering questions, the headlines that were released wouldn't be promotional.

I opened the door to the private function room. I had been gone not even ten minutes and Cecilia had taken my seat next to my wife. Bastion placed a drink next to Madeline, sitting on her other side.

Cecilia glared at him, "Go away Bas. Can't you see where talking?"

"Me sitting here doesn't stop your mouth from moving."

"Vince!" Cecilia yelled, looking over her shoulder at me. "Make him leave. He ruins everything!"

Worse than children. Taking my whiskey from in front of her. "Bug, are you okay?" surely that one conversation with Bastion wouldn't make her this tearful.

Rolling her eyes, she reached for her glass, refusing to look at me.

I didn't have the patience today for twenty questions. Walking around the other side of the table, dragging a chair out, pretending it didn't bother me, I lost my seat.

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Rome pulled a seat out next to me. “Any fall out from last night?”

Right. The college students. “Accidental overdose from what was reported.”

He shook his head. “I still don’t know how that bastard got a gun through security.”

The girls’ bodies were viewed and identified this morning. Lucky for us, the man hadn’t shot them in the head.

“Did you move the product?”

Rome tapped the table, “Yeah, um thanks,” He turned closer to me. “For not telling Nik, and you know. Not giving me a lecture.”

“You learned a lesson, right?”

He grunted. I was sure last night would have costed him a lot of sleep. Even a temporary drug hold can cause problems. Especially at the strip clubs that are known for drama.

“And the shooter? No issue with him?”

“I’m sure a missing report will eventually be filed, but,” I shrugged, “seems more like the type of guy people would be grateful is missing.” Murdering his ex-girlfriend and her best friend, out of jealousy.

“Vince, I want this,”

I looked across the table at Cecilia holding her phone to me.

“Ask Nik.”

Normally, anything she asks for leads to prolonged headaches.

“He said I had to ask you.”

Of course he did.

Taking her phone. “No.” I handed it straight back to her. I was not falling for this again. The last yacht ended with an ocean salvage crew. “I told you, from now on you rent them. That’s it.”

“But if I rent it, I can’t remodel it and look.” she swiped the screen, showing me another photo. “I have a mood board.”

“Still no.”

“That’s not fair! I have a name picked and everything!”

“Let us guess, The Sinking Cecilia.” Bastion laughed, handing something to Nik.

“Cecilia, don’t. Put it down.” I pointed at her, seeing she was seconds away from throwing a spoon at him.

“Why does he never get in trouble? Bas is your favorite.” Ceci pushed back in her seat, pouting. But I knew exactly what she was doing, trying to guilt trip me into buying that floating headache.

Staffing the crew, the maintenance, the tantrums and crying, I would be forced to

listen too when anything mildly goes wrong during the remodel. Then I would have to find a way to solve all these problems that would come up.

The private doors opened again. I frowned, looking at Nikolai. By his expression, he wasn't expecting Sofia, either.

"Great." Ceci muttered. "The bitch can't take a hint."

Nik and I shared a look. When the girls fought, it got mean and nasty fast. It usually ended with weeks of silent treatment until we intervened

"What have I done to deserve both of them home at once?" Bastion grumbled.

Sofia pulled out a seat next to Cecilia, who immediately turned to glare at her. One look shared, and I knew how this would end within five minutes.

I stood up. "Ceci, up, we're changing seats."

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“I was here first. Tell her to move!”

“I asked you,”

“Typical. You always take her side.”

“It was my seat first. And I want to sit next to my wife.” I walked around the table.

“Don’t make me ask again.”

“Why can’t Bas move?”

Nik grinned at the end of the table. Of course he won’t say anything. A month of dealing with these types of petty arguments on his own.

“Fine, both of you can move. Bastion go sit next to Luca, Ceci, next to Rome.”
Grown fucking adults, acting like children. “Now.”

Both dragging their chairs back, walking around the table.

Taking my seat back next to Madeline. Slowly the conversation returned to the table. Running my fingers down Madeline's spine. I was far too interested in exploring her back, then paying attention to what my family was talking about.

I had only just earned the right back to touch her.

Backless dresses had to be my favorite. Everyone seeing my name tattooed across her back. That this beautiful woman was mine.

Madeline laughed at something Bastion said. I brushed her hair back. I hated it when it got in the way of me seeing her.

Fuck. I had missed hearing her laugh.

I touched her knee, she was cold. Maybe I could get the heating turned up.

The girls bickering got louder, which stole my attention. I looked between Ceci and Sofia and Rome. I must have missed something.

“Sounds like Cecilia's type, tragic and toxic.” Sofia glared at her across the table.

“Get a life, Sofia, and preferably not mine.”

I looked at Nik. He can deal with whatever that is. I just wanted to drink my whiskey and touch my wife's back.

“Oh, I'm sorry for caring.” Sofia looked up at the table. “Cecilia has been dating a psychopath.”

I sighed, “Sofia. Unless he hurts her, it's none of our business.” I kept my hand on Madeline's back and reached for my glass.

“He does! He chokes her out. He spikes her drinks. I've seen him with a knife at her throat, when she was passed out on herbed! And she is always covered in bruises! He is a fucking toxic psychopath!”

Surely Sofia was lying. Though by the glare Ceci was giving her and the lack of yelling.

My hand froze on Madeline's back.

“Cecilia, is this true?” I looked between them. “Sofia, if you’re lying, you better admit it now.”

“I’m not lying. And that isn’t even half of the terrible shit he has done to her.”

I looked at Nik. He seemed to be having the same reaction as me.

“How long has she been seeing him, Sofia?” I asked, considering Cecilia wasn’t saying anything.

“Nearly a year. And she is getting worse the more time she is near him.”

“Shut up Sofia!” Ceci yelled at her. “I’m sorry I’m not vanilla like you, and fuck my bodyguard.”

“You don’t even see how bad you’ve got around him! Admit it. The only reason you’re here this weekend is because of him!”

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“Admit the only reason you came is to stalk me!” Ceci yelled back. “You’re so pathetic! Get your own life!”

“Cecilia, don’t speak to her like that.” Nikolai stood up.

Rome seemed ready to grab Ceci, knowing damn well she wasn’t above jumping across the table.

“Fine, I’ll be pathetic as long as you don’t end up killed by him!”

The next second, Cecilia threw her glass at Sofia, hitting her in the face. Sofia screamed so loud in my ear. Deafening me.

“Enough!” I hit the table, standing up.

Pure white fucking anger goes through me as I see Sofia’s face. The blood wouldn’t stop. Split open right beside her eye. Taking the cloth Bastion handed me, I held it to her face.

“How bad is it?” Nikolai walked to the other side.

Nik took over, holding pressure. He’ll take her to the hospital, while I find out this fucker's name.

Looking at Cecilia, it was the lack of guilt in her eyes that made it worse.

Madeline stood up. “I’ll go with Sofia.”

“Wait,” I cupped her face, “I’m sorry.” I saw her flinch, well more like jump. Fuck. I should have known better. “I’m so—”

She cut me off, kissing me. “I’ll see you at home.”

Bastion, Luca, and Rome left the room, leaving me with Cecilia.

My eyes were glued to my little sister. We raised her better. Well. I thought we had raised her better.

Cecilia sat down. “Okay, get to it then. They’re gone. Scream at me.”

Out of all of them, she had always been the hardest.

Slowly counting to twenty, before walking around the table to sit next to her.

Was this fucker the reason she had been so distant, her need to party so hard? Three times she had been held by the police. I’d put it down to her having fun, but clearly I’ve fucked up. We gave her too much freedom.

“Explain.”

Reaching for my cigarette packet. Once I know this man’s name, my night is about to get a lot busier.

“Does it matter?”

Flicking my lighter. If I make it to thirty, without having my first heart attack, it will be a miracle.

“It matters to me, bug.”

She continued to stare at the table. “Can you please just yell at me instead?”

Well, maybe I hadn’t failed her completely. At least she is showing some guilt.

“It’s over okay. Months ago. Just go with Sofia.” Her knee suddenly started shaking.
“They woke up one morning and decided they were done with me.”

Practicing my breathing techniques.

“But you can’t kill them. I think um I love them. So. I’d never forgive you.”

“Them?” I repeated, “Is that their pronouns or?—”

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“No, it's two.” She finished her drink. “I was dating two of them.”

Fan-fucking-tastic.

Of course, Cecilia would have to fall in love with not one but two psychopaths. Because my ability to stay calm under impossible circumstances hasn't been tested enough.

CHAPTER 37

Vince

Cecilia was to stay at her house at the compound until further notice. Sofia was staying with Nikolai, and according to him, I'd gone weak when it came to Cecilia.

He was probably right. I had given her permission to remodel her house. But it would keep her here longer. Maybe by having her closer, we can keep a better eye on her.

He was going to have a fucking fit when he finds out I brought that stupid yacht. Half a billion dollars for a never-ending headache. A terrible fucking investment.

Lighting my cigarette.

My wife has a habit of staying up late, and I hadn't kicked my habit of watching her from my bedroom window. All the reasons I could delay her curtains longer came to mind again. Right now, she still believed it was the custom length that was causing the holdup.

Watching her get off the bed. Who was she talking to, and why was she laughing?

I walked closer to the window. She looked frustrated. Ending the call, she dropped the phone on the bedside table.

Fuck. My wife took her clothes off so fucking beautifully. My throat tightened, watching her lay on her bed naked.

Every night, she had the same routine. Tonight, though, it was different.

Arching her back up, no. Surely fucking not. The cigarette nearly fell from my mouth. As I go tense, watching as she touches my clit, my pussy. The two things I was deeply fucking deprived of.

I dropped the cigarette in the ashtray. As I walked out of my room, walking down the hallway. Did she think I was joking? I told her that clit was to stay untouched, unless touched by me.

I knocked on her door. "Madeline, you awake?" Don't dare fucking lie to me.

Silence. I knocked again, harder. Out of fear, she would finish before answering me.

Finally, I heard movement just before the door opened.

"Is everything okay?" she was slightly out of breath, cheeks flushed.

By her cute frustrated frown. She hadn't finished. Immediately I relaxed. Leaning against the door, "Just missed my wife."

She barely could hide her annoyance. "Right, well, it's late. We can talk tomorrow?"

Gripping the door before she closed it. “Why not now?” Slowly looking her up and down. “Actually, better idea. Come sleep with me tonight.”

Her lips parted; I could see her disappointment. It took all my self control not to grin. “Please, you’ve been busy all week.”

Biting her bottom lip, clearly annoyed. “Fine, just give me a minute.”

I nodded, purposely leaning against the door, opening it wider. I couldn’t stop my grin as she looked at me, annoyed. “I’ll wait. Grab what you need.”

I know damn well she was naked under that thin oversize tee. And I wasn’t giving her the chance to finish herself.

“Fine, let's go.” She grabbed nothing.

Perfect.

Reaching for her hand, only for her to avoid me, pretending she needed to close the door and then crossing her arms, following me.

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I was lucky to get her in our bed once a week.

“I didn’t think you’d be home.” She gave me a side way look before walking around the bed.

“Lately it’s been long nights.” Gripping the edge of my t-shirt and taking it off, I threw it to the ground. Watching as she got in bed, keeping the shirt covering her ass.

I moved to lie next to her. Pulling her closer to me, before tracing her cheek. I missed having her always within arm’s reach. For years, I hadn’t kept my hands off her. The last few months were equal to a detox.

She closed her eyes. “I missed you too.” I loved how she was letting me touch her again.

Slowly brushing her hair back, I leaned down, taking her fingers in my mouth. Just the taste of her tightened everyone of my muscles. Fuck.

She opened her eyes immediately. “What are you doing?”

“If you tell me to stop, I will, okay?”

She slowly nodded.

“Finishing what you started,” licking both fingers clean, “What you touched of mine without permission.” Moving my hand down her stomach.

“Spread your legs, my love,” I kissed her jaw. “Now go back to what you were doing.”

Gently I held her face, “but use my hand.”

Her breathing instantly sharper.

“Let me watch you gush all over my fingers.”

It was going to take all my self-control not to take over. Months. Fucking Months. I had waited for this.

During the claiming, I had been robbed of seeing her. If I had a choice, the lights would have stayed on.

Her hips arched as she pushed two fingers in. Soaking. Fucking. Wet.

“Fuck, baby,” I bit her lip, “open your eyes, look at me while you use me.”

Every small gasp made my dick throb harder. Brushing my thumb over her clit, the moan that followed caused my blood to rush.

Clenching my jaw, trying to keep my fingers still. “You’re doing so good, baby. Look at your pussy swallowing my fingers.” Holding my groan back, “Show me you can take three.” Kissing her. I pull back, watching as she pushes three of my fingers in. Moving my thumb over her clit again, “fucking perfect.”

Swallowing tightly, I really hadn’t thought this through. Pre cum leaking from my cock.

“Please,” she whispered breathlessly against my lips. “Take care of your wife.”

Any self-restraint I had disappeared. She had said that on purpose. Curling my fingers forward, she let go of my hand. At first I moved slowly, watching her arch to my pace, ignoring how she kept pushing her hips, trying to thrust down on me.

“Take that top off, show your husband those perfect fucking tits.”

Watching too eagerly as she pulls it off. Naked and at my control. Better than my fantasies.

Rubbing my thumb over her clit, keeping the same slow pace.

“Your nipples are begging to be dripping with my cum.” Biting on her bottom lip harder. “You’d wipe every drop off and eat it, wouldn’t you?”

Groaning, as she clenched around my fingers, “You like the sound of that hey baby, covered in your husband's cum.” Picking up my pace, my dick throbbing, “Licking the mess you made of me off your fingers.”

She clenched so hard around my fingers. Fuck. She was finishing.

“Look at me, baby, open your eyes. I want to see you finish.”

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Her eyes met mine.

“Good girl.”

Smothering her moan with my mouth as she finished gushing down my hand. Easing my pace, before stopping. I leaned my forehead against hers, waiting for her to open her eyes again.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” kissing her cheek softly.

Her small little whimpers as I moved my fingers, still not taking them out. It was selfish, but I wasn’t ready to stop. I wanted to taste her. My dick throbbed at the thought of being between her legs and watching her come apart with my mouth.

Slowly, I pulled my fingers out. Her hand moved to the back of my neck. I loved her lips, this shade of red, slightly swollen. She leaned up, kissing me. Wrapping her arm around my neck, knowing what she wanted, I rolled to my back, letting her on top.

I’d die happy with her like this. Naked and kissing me.

“Careful,” I grabbed her hips, stopping her from rocking.

I had a plan for our first real time together. The claiming had been about making her a Crow. Marking her as mine.

The first time I fuck her. That would be ours.

But tonight was about her, not me. Rubbing herself on my cock. It was her small whimpers that were breaking my willpower.

“That’s not fair,” she pouted.

“Like how it wasn’t fair, watching you enjoy what I couldn’t.” I held her face. If I hadn’t been home, I would have missed it.

“Or maybe I just wanted to see if you’d come and take over.”

My expression dropped. She knew. She knew all this time I was watching her. She had been testing me.

“Fuck, you’re going to wish you didn’t tell me that.” Holding her hips still, I pulled her to my chest. Moving us to the end of the bed.

“Have you been testing me?” Tugging her hair back. “You want to see how frustrated you’ve made me?” Running her hand over my cock. “For months, you’ve taunted me.”

Lifting her off my lap, lowering her to the ground on to her knees.

“If it gets too much, tap my leg and I’ll stop. Understand?”

She nodded.

All this time, she was purposely undressing for me. Stretching every day and night, basically naked, teasing me. Driving me wild. On purpose.

“Do you know how many times I’ve wanked off to you? Watching you.”

Standing up, pushing my boxers down. Immediately, her eyes widened.

“Open,” tilting her head back to the right angle. “You’ll let me use your mouth, won’t you?” the way she nodded made my breathing heavy

Twisting her hair around my hand.

“Relax your throat baby,” fighting back a groan as she takes me deeper, “good girl.” Pausing halfway “You can take my full dick, can’t you?” she started gagging as I went deeper. “So close, a few more inches.” I couldn’t stop the moan as her throat tightened around me. “Fuck,” holding her to the base of my cock. Pulling her back, “You did so good baby,” wiping the tears from her cheek. “You can take me fucking your throat, can’t you?”

She nodded.

“You’re so fucking good for me, aren’t you?” pushing her back, I felt her throat relax. Damn. I shouldn’t feel so proud of her for listening. “Good girl,” going deep again, holding her, “Listen to you gagging on your husband's cock, you’re doing so well.” Fucking her mouth, losing control, groaning, as she relaxed, letting me guide her up and down.

“Fuck, you make me so proud.” Holding her at the base of my cock again.

“I can’t wait to take your pussy just like this,” groaning, dropping my shoulders. “Fill your pretty pussy back up with my cum.”

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She moaned on my cock, “you like the sound of that?”

Gritting my teeth. “Fuck baby, I’m going to cum down your throat,” loosening my grip, “Tap my leg now if you want me to stop.”

I slowed, giving her a chance, only for her to suck down on me. She wanted it. Dropping my shoulders back, finishing down the back of her throat. My heart pounding faster than it ever has. Her hand wrapped around my dick, draining me, as she sucks the cum still leaking.

“My perfect wife.” I held her cheek, struggling to get my breathing back to normal.

Would she let me taste her? Her eyes were heavy as she looked up at me. I glanced at the time. It was three in the morning.

Leaning down, I wrapped my arm around her. Holding her to me, as I sat down on the bed.

“My love, are you tired? Tell me what you need.” Sitting on my lap, she curled into me, tucking her head under my chin.

I gently pulled her hair from the side of her face, slowly running my hand up and down her leg while holding her.

Within minutes, she was asleep.

I nearly lost this. I nearly lost her. Repeatedly. I kissed the top of her head.

For the first time in my life, I understood my father's madness.

If I lost Madeline, I wouldn't just go mad. I'd follow her. And I wouldn't wait for someone to do it for me.

I pushed the blankets back and then pulled them over us.

God gave this devil a perfect angel.

If he ever took her, I'd follow and beg at the heaven's gates to let me in.

Then again. I might just go in and take her back. She belonged with me. Always with me. Heaven. Hell. Here.

She would always be with me. Somehow. I'd make sure of it.

CHAPTER 38

Madeline

I checked my lipstick in the mirror before walking out of the dressing room. My heart beating faster seeing Vince asleep.

I walked to his side of the bed. It felt wrong to just leave without telling him. Even though waking him felt unfair. Leaving and not telling him felt worse.

“Hey,” I touched his cheek, watching him wake up.

He seemed confused at first.

“I'm leaving and it felt wrong to not tell you.”

“What?” He frowned. “What time is it?”

“Nearly six.”

“In the morning?”

I nodded.

“Come back to bed.” He reached for me, and I grabbed his hand.

“I can’t. I have to meet my uncle at the airfield.” It was the first time he asked me to accompany him on a trip since Dad's death. I couldn’t cancel.

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“Fuck that. Give me my phone. I’ll tell him no.”

“I’ll be back tonight.” I ran my fingers over his knuckles before kissing the back of his hand. “I love you.”

He seemed stunned as I pulled back.

“Go back to sleep.” I grabbed my phone off the bedside table. I was already late.

My brain was on autopilot all day.

I’d never been more grateful for a straightforward negotiation. Even my uncle was in a good mood, not arguing the point.

I wasn’t sure why Uncle Cole even asked me to come. Until he started drinking, and heavily apologizing for what happened.

I’d never seen him so emotional. Apparently, he had guilt for not stopping my mother. A part of me believed him, another part of me, knows he did blame me. At the time, he wanted me to be punished.

Now that he wasn’t blinded by grief and anger. He was seeing perhaps things went too far.

Perhaps I didn’t deserve months and months of her mood swings. Hitting me one second, then pretending nothing happened the next. Every hour, she was completely unpredictable.

I kept thinking things would get better. The worse form of self-harm is waiting, expecting more from someone who will never give it.

I hadn't realized how bad things got until I moved back to Vincennes.

Every time I heard a door open, I jumped. Every time he moved out of the corner of my eye, I flinched.

I fought back the tears as I stared at my phone. Twenty past ten at night. Any chance of me making it home disappeared when my uncle started drinking.

Yawning, I pressed Vince's name before holding the phone to my ear.

I took my heels off before laying down on the hotel bed.

"Madeline, I'm starting to get worried. Where are you?"

Closing my eyes. "I'm stuck here. My uncle started drinking, and sent the pilot home, without telling me."

Even though he was silent, I could hear his frustration.

"Sorry."

"It's not your fault, my love,"

"Still, I'm sorry."

"Where are you staying? Do you need me to organize a hotel? What town? We probably have a house there."

“Funny you said that. I can see a Crow Hotel from my window.”

“Staying at our competitors?”

“The host organized it. It wasn’t the time to decline,” I rolled onto my side, staring at the flagship crow emblem on the building. “The Classic is extremely impressive.”

“I know. I built it.”

“My husband is so talented.” That warm feeling flooded me again, just thinking about him. “I promise to be back tomorrow. It won’t be until the afternoon. My uncle never fly’s early when he is hung over.”

“Did your security check the room?”

“Yes, and now two are posted at the door. I’m safe.”

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He sighed, “Sleep well, my love. I’ll see you soon.”

“Goodnight Vince.”

Ending the call, I rolled over. Not even sleeping in my dress, or a hotel bed. Could keep me from falling asleep.

My grip tightened on the gun under my pillow, moving my thumb over the safety. Just as I felt the bed dip, I opened my eyes.

The spike of panic disappearing.

Vince.

“What are you doing here?” My voice was muffled, watching as he got into bed next to me.

“I missed you.” He kissed my forehead, pulling me to his chest. “And I didn’t want to sleep without you.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s late,” His hand ran down my back, “you’re still dressed.”

“Didn’t have the energy to take it off.”

He pushed the covers back.

“Don’t break the zip. I didn’t bring anything else to wear.”

Rolling over, as he unzipped the dress. Pulling it free. Immediately, I was more comfortable.

I pushed back into him, resting my head on his arm.

I let him take the gun from my hand. For the first time, I didn’t feel a need to have it within reach while staying at a hotel. Not when he was right next to me.

Vince was sitting on the edge of the bed, a towel around his waist. Talking to Nikolai on the phone.

I gripped his shoulder, sitting over his lap.

Seeing him naked should not have such an affect on me.

Seriously, couldn’t Nik talk to him later? Running my nail under his necklace before kissing the faint scar on his chest.

He undid the front of my towel, pushing it off me. That drunken look of possession in his eyes really did crazy things to me.

If he thought we were leaving this room without him fucking me. We were going to have an argument. I reached for his free hand, taking his finger in my mouth. Then a second.

I frowned, seeing my lipstick mark from yesterday still on the back of his hand, near the edge of his thumb. How hadn’t that come off in the shower?

Taking his fingers out of my mouth, I looked closer.

My heartbeat suddenly quicker. He had gotten it tattooed. In the exact shade as my lipstick. The red ink stood out against all his black tattoos.

He nipped my bottom lip.

I was so focused on the tattoo. I hadn't even heard him end the call.

Before he could deepen the kiss and end my ability to think, I put my hand on his chest, pushing him back.

“Did you get my...” I stared at the tattoo again. Suddenly, my words disappeared. It wasn't even a perfect shape, slightly smudged at the corners. Why wouldn't he have told me so I could have got a perfect shape for him.

Though why had he got it tattooed in the first place. I had always kissed his hand, and I had left a lot of lipstick marks on him over the years.

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He pushed my hair back. "I wanted to remember it."

"What?"

"The first time you said you loved me."

I went immediately weak; a warm rush went through me. It was suddenly a lot harder to think.

"My love, are you speechless?"

I slowly nodded, my throat dry. He had... he had tattooed my smeared imperfect lipstick on his hand because of that. Because I said I loved him.

Holding his hand, I slowly traced my nail on the edge of his thumb, staring at the new tattoo.

His only colored tattoo.

He kissed my shoulder.

"Haven't I said it before?" I asked, surely, I had told him.

He stilled one look and I realized I hadn't. How had I not said it all these years. Moving closer to him, I wrapped my arms around his neck, kissing him. At first soft, then harder. I pulled back, breathless. "I love you."

He flipped me on my back. “The twin’s resort is opening next weekend.” he kissed my neck. “Come with me?”

I nodded before kissing him again.

CHAPTER 39

Vince

Jealous of a fucking strawberry. I was pathetic.

Deprived of her attention, every passing hour, I was closer to insanity. Watching as she took another bite, talking to someone I didn’t know.

I wanted her to myself. But every few minutes, someone else was here talking to her. Why did she have to be so approachable?

If I wasn’t so proud of the twins for getting the resort running on their own, I’d yell at them for the guest list. Private island, invite only, and still surrounded by people that all seemed to know my wife.

All fucking night. I had been taunted. Her only wearing a bikini while sitting on my lap. Talking to anyone but me.

Gripping the back of her neck, I brought her mouth to mine. Forcing my tongue into her mouth and taking that strawberry.

Not even fighting me, she let me have it.

“Couldn’t get your own?” Just barely kissing me before she pulled away too quickly.

“I wanted that one.”

“Of course you did.”

Holding her in place, I kissed her. Ignoring the fuckers who she had been talking to. Maybe they could get the hint and leave.

Yeah. I couldn't do this anymore.

Squeezing her ass, holding her to me. It was selfish. But fuck it.

“Night's over.” I kissed her again. Standing up, purposely not giving her a lot of time to speak, before taking her hand.

At least she knew better than to argue with me about it. I'd managed to wait until we got away from the crowd before picking her up.

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Carrying her back to the villa. All the ways I thought of taking her ran through my mind. Now, I had to make a choice. At one point, I was ready just to bend her over the table.

“Finally.” Her hands reached for my belt.

I grabbed her wrist. “My speed.”

She dropped her head back, complaining.

I laid her back on the bed. Untying her bikini bottom. “Legs up, my love.”

“Can’t I just ride you?”

Absolutely fucking not. I lowered to my knees, blood rushing faster as I kissed the inside of her thigh. Better than drugs.

“Wait,” she sat up, stopping me. “What are you doing?”

Seriously? I’d been haunted for days, after tasting her off her fingers.

“You don’t have to do that. Just fuck me.” She moved back from me. “Trust me, it’s all I want. In our world, men don’t get on their knees and I don’t expect it.”

That sounded specific. “Which fucker told you that?” pinching my eyes shut. “Actually, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.” Grabbing her legs, I dragged her back to me. “Now you’re going to lie still, and let me eat your pussy, aren’t you?”

kissing along her thigh. “Remind me how perfect my wife is. How much she loves to please her husband.”

Slowly moving my tongue over her. She arched her hips in my face. Fuck.

“Just like that. Let me lick your clit.”

So responsive.

“You can take me playing with your pussy too, can’t you?” Moving two fingers into her, slowly. If she kept moaning like that, I wouldn’t get to fuck her. I’d cum in my pants like a fucking teenager.

I needed to build some stamina with her.

I couldn’t stop my groan. “You hear that baby?” Moving my fingers, “Fuck, I love the sound of you gushing for me.” Sucking on her clit, watching her arch her back. Her legs clenching down on my shoulders.

I slowed; no way I was letting her finish that quickly. Then again. I could make the second one longer.

I picked up the pace. The blood rushing from my head as she gasped my name.

Stamina. I had to build fucking stamina. At this rate, I’d be blowing my load within a minute. It was hard enough not to cum with her riding my fingers and finishing in my mouth.

I kneeled between her legs, stroking myself, while watching as she slowly came back.

“Eyes on me, as I take you for the first time.” Her legs still trembled as I spread them,

wrapping them around my back.

Cupping her face, I slowly thrust into her. Pausing every time she closed her eyes. Waiting. Even if it was physically fucking painful.

During the claiming, I didn't get to see her. I was too high on this primal fucking need to mark her as mine. Claiming her soul. Her body. As mine. Mine to protect. Mine to fuck. Mine to love.

Taking a slow breath, as I moved my hands down her waist.

"I'm going to fuck you slow. Take my time." I held her hips, stopping her from riding me. "Then in an hour, I'm fucking you hard, rough." I bit her bottom lip. That whimper of hers nearly breaking me, "In the morning, I'm taking you from behind. I wanna spread your pretty ass while I pound you. Then after that in the shower, I'm taking you so fucking rough you'll barely be capable of breathing."

Her pussy clenched around me, strangling my cock. "Do you like hearing how desperate I am for you," arching her back, fighting for a faster pace. I gave her two sharp thrusts, her moan, nearly doing me in. "Now you can be patient, can't you? I want to taste you finishing again." I kissed her as I pulled out, moving down the bed. "I promise, I'll fuck you so hard after this, you'll be sore tomorrow."

I'd never get over seeing her this desperate for me. It made me want to delay fucking her, just so I can keep seeing that need in her eyes for me.

CHAPTER 40

Madeline

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Standing under the hot water. Every muscle was sore. But I couldn't stop smiling. Leaning my head against the tiles. A draft of cold air went around my legs as the door opened.

Finally, he was off the phone.

"I'm making a rule," his hands moved up my back, "About showering without me." holding my stomach, as he pulled me back to him.

"Does it go both ways?" I dropped my head back to his chest, staring up at him.

He nodded, holding my throat, kissing me, first softly, then hard, until he turned me around.

He moved my legs and thrust into me. I couldn't stop myself from flinching out of pain.

"Fuck," he stilled, "I'm sorry." The concern in his eyes makes me melt. "My love, I'm so fucking sorry."

"It's just my legs. I'm not used to having them spread for so long." Between last night and this morning. I was sure I had used muscles I didn't even know I had.

"Don't stop, you promised me this last night."

He kissed me, pulling out before I could complain, turning me around. My hands went to the glass as he lifted me up. Slowly pushing in me again. How he managed to

fuck me as if I was fragile one second, and then not the next.

As he promised, I can barely breathe.

I would have to start exercising to keep up with him. Hiding my head in my arms, as my legs started to shake.

“Fuck, I can’t see you.” he wrapped his arm around my waist, carrying me out of the shower and sitting me on the vanity.

Twisting my wet hair, he pulled my head back. My eyes locking with his in the mirror.

“That’s better,”

I couldn’t have agreed more.

Fuck.

Suddenly, I was lightheaded. Dizzy. Weak.

The possession in his eyes, as he looked at me

I’d be whatever he needed, so long as he kept looking at me like that.

I loved seeing him this feral for me.

My legs started to shake as he lifted me off the vanity. Holding me in the air as he fucked me.

“That’s it, baby. You’re so close, I can feel you.” Before he could finish that sentence

I was finishing, somehow, he already knew my body better than me.

He slowed the pace, and I hadn't realized why until I opened my eyes, seeing him in the mirror.

"Fuck. I love watching you cum." slowly he moved me up and down his cock.

Before he picked up pace, I grabbed his arm. "I want this load in my mouth." Feeling him go tense while holding me. "Please,"

He carried me out of the bathroom. Turning the shower off as he walked past.

He pulled out of me and lowered me to the ground, though I noticed how he purposely had put me on the edge of the carpet.

"Now if you want me to stop, or if it gets too much?—"

"I know. Hit your thigh." I cut him off, licking my lips,

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The smirk on his face, “In a hurry?”

I nodded. “I really want my husband's cum.”

Suddenly, all playfulness was gone in his eyes. That crazed possession was back. That I loved.

“Open.” He grabbed my hair, slowly guiding my mouth up and down him. “Can you taste yourself on my cock?”

My answer was a muffled moan. Which seemed to only drive him crazier.

His shoulders rolled back as he fucked my throat at a speed. He couldn't talk. Every groan just turning me on more.

Squeezing my thighs together, as his head fell back, finishing down my throat. Fuck.

I blinked quickly. I didn't want the tears ruining my view.

I'd never get over seeing him do that. Every tattooed muscle tense, as he held my head. Before going weak, letting me take control. Slowly moving my hand up and down him, licking him clean,

Watching as his eyes slowly opened, he looked down at me.

My heart raced so fast, I took his hand from my hair. “I love you.”

The drunken possession in his eyes, as he looked at me, completely speechless.

His fingers gently ran up and down the back of my thigh as I laid beside him on the outdoor lounge. I was never one for resort staying, but I could get used to this. Sneaking a look over my shoulder, I really loved seeing him so relaxed.

Though maybe our sex marathon had worn him out. Shifting, I went up on my knees, his hand going over my ass, before I turned to sit over his lap.

Lightly running my nails along his shoulders, up his neck. His eyes were still closed as I moved my nails through his hair. Yeah. I really loved seeing him relaxed.

I gently kissed his lips and pulled back. "Is my husband awake?"

"I love that," he mumbled, his eyes still closed, "Being yours." His fingers ran down my back.

My heart raced at the thought that maybe it had as much effect on him as my love and my wife had over me.

Holding his face, I kissed him again. "I've been thinking about stepping back for a bit," my throat tightened, "from my family."

His hand paused on my back.

"I would hand over the international connections to Uncle Felix and my cousins. Do this one last trip and..." my stomach twisted into a knot, "step back." The same emotion started to strangle me. "You wouldn't consider it as betraying the family, right?"

His fingers started to move again, slowly running over the tattoo on my back. Maybe

reminding me which family I now belonged to.

“My love, do you really want my honesty?”

“Yes.”

“They’ve overworked you for years. Undervalued you. You’re the kingpin of their organization. The glue to the family. You stop working, everything falls apart,” he slowly opened his eyes, anger smoldering, “it’s overdue for them to realize that.”

For the first time in my life, I didn’t feel a need to prove myself. Perhaps it would be nice not to be at the beg and call of my phone, talking through problems that most of the time were preventable.

“It would be so freeing not to be tied to the airfield. Going weeks without flying multiple times a day.” I sighed, “But then I might get bored.”

I traced his neck tattoo down his chest. His body was a piece of art. The tattoos, the muscles, the scars. I leaned forward, pressing a kiss to the center of his chest. Over the faded scar. His cousins’ wives were right. That night, when he claimed me. I wished I had enjoyed it more.

“Might be a great opportunity to use your credit cards.” he pulled the tie at the front of my bikini top. “My wife promised me high maintenance. I miss that look, the one you used to get, when you got a new pair of high heels.”

“Our wardrobe is full,”

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He groaned, “I love that word too,” leaning forward, biting my bottom lip. “Ours.” Holding the back of my neck, he brought my lips back to his, kissing me softly. “I’ll extend it.”

“What?”

“Our wardrobe,”

“No, you’ve already done that once for me. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine,”

“I don’t need?—”

He silenced me by kissing me, not stopping until my thoughts disappeared. “You’re so fucking beautiful.” He moved my hair behind my ear.

“You can stop with the compliments,” I smiled against his mouth. “I can only marry you once.”

“Stop moving,”

“Stop making me move!” I giggled; he was tickling me on purpose. “Stop!” I whined, getting off his lap, “That’s it. I’m not wearing it.”

“Madeline,”

I shook my head, crossing my arms and standing out of his reach. “You’re tickling me on purpose.”

“I’m just trying to do it up. You’re the one wiggling.” he shrugged, acting all innocent. Pity for him that smug smirk was giving away his game.

“I’m wearing something else.”

“But I love this dress on you. It shows off my name so well.”

I shrugged, pretending not to care, even though that one sentence had me weak.

“Come back, please,” he tapped his leg.

I rocked on my heels back and forth. Slowly, I walked back to the bed, eyeing him suspiciously.

“That’s it,” he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me back to his lap, “back home, where you belong.” He kissed my neck, gently twisting my hair, and moving it over my shoulder out of his way.

Like a fool, my grin just got bigger. How did a few words make me feel so warm and happy?

“Alright, where was I before you left me?” he nipped my ear, pulling the straps of the dress back. His finger just brushed my side; I froze, not trusting him for a second. At least this time, he got one strap through the side loop.

I started to relax, just as his fingers slipped under the sides of the dress, and I was squealing within seconds.

“That’s it!” I squirmed off his lap, completely breathless from squealing and not amused, even if hearing him laugh was making me grin stupidly. “I’m not going.”

He groaned, “My sweetheart, I’m sorry, come back.”

I shook my head. Walking across the room, I pushed the dress down, stepping out of it.

“No, don’t do that, I’m really sorry,”

Grabbing the overthrow from the couch, I wrapped it around myself, ignoring his complaining and very adorable whining. Moving the cushions, I sat back down on the couch.

I don’t like playful Vince. He can stay over there, away from me. I focused back on the instructions for the television. I was still trying to get my show to play.

Even as he kneeled in front of me, I pretended to focus on the booklet.

“My love, I’m sorry.” He kissed my cheek, slipping his hands under the blanket, touching my legs.

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“You and that word my,” I flipped the page over, “My love, my pussy, my clit, my darling, my sweetheart,” I pouted, trying to read the stupid instruction, maybe I should just call the front desk and complain to management, or I could take the issue up with the owner. Vince.

He gently lifted my face, so I would look at him, “You forgot my wife,” stroking his thumb across my cheek, “My beautiful incredible wife,” leaning closer, his expression changing, the playfulness disappearing as he kissed me. “The love of my life,”

I sighed, “That’s not fair,” dropping the booklet to the side. “How can I be mad at you when you say things like that?”

“You can be mad at me,” his mouth so close to mine, “just don’t leave me.”

I kissed him, the emotion in his words breaking me.

Pushing the blanket off my shoulders, I wrapped my legs around his waist. As expected, it was seconds before he changed positions, sitting down and keeping me pinned to him.

“Good,” he leaned his forehead against mine, holding me, “back home where you belong.”

I slowly nodded while moving my hands over his arms. “My home.” He kissed me so gently, my heart shattered. I’d never felt so loved. So, wanted. So, safe.

Undoing his belt, I slowly pushed down on his cock.

“Slow my love,” he kissed the corner of my mouth, “I need to fuck you slow,” one sharp thrust, causing my lips to part, “and take my time.”

“Okay,” I kissed him back, wrapping my arms around his neck as he stood up, carrying me back to bed.

I never wanted to face this world again without being his.

CHAPTER 41

Vince

Running my fingers under the tiny satin straps across her lower back. While she passionately talked to Bastion and Luca about something. Every second that passed, I regretted agreeing to the family dinner.

She was insisting on sitting on her own chair. I hated it.

Following the crisscross straps, until I had the bow. I could not wait to take this dress off her.

“I’ll be back,” she twisted on her chair, kissing my cheek.

“Where are you going?” I grabbed her waist.

“I need another drink,”

“I’ll get it,”

“Vince. Sit and talk to your brothers. I’ll be two minutes.”

Even as she kissed me again, I really wasn’t impressed with her leaving. We had waiters. Staff that would bring anything she wanted to her. So she could stay here with me.

The only benefit of her walking away from me was watching her ass and those legs. That light pink satin clung to her perfectly. Fuck.

When we got back to the room, I was taking her with the dress on, and those heels.

“It would seem you and Maddy are finally close.”

“What did I say about that?” I watched as she walked out of view. Before turning to look at Bastion. He could wipe that grin off his face.

“No disrespecting women. Or talking about your wife, in any sexual context.” He grumbled, rolling his eyes.

“Because?”

“Because you raised men, not immature boys.” He pushed back in his seat.

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Nice to know that the lecture had sunken in.

“I’m proud of you two for getting this place operating on your own. The location, the tax benefits.” It wasn’t just another resort, not in my eyes. This was proof they could handle themselves. No other twenty-year-olds were taking on this type of responsibility. “If something happened to me or Nik, you two would be alright. And that gives me a lot of fucking peace.”

“Look at that. We made Vince proud.” Luca nudged Bastion's arm.

“Speak for yourself. He’s always been proud of since I made the sports team. He didn’t miss one game.”

Eighty percent of those games he sat on the bench chatting girls up at the fence instead of playing. The number of sore ankles he faked, which always happened just after he went on the field.

“Please, you didn’t get your fat ass off that bench. He had certificates and trophies of mine to display.”

“Yeah, certificates that went next to Sofia’s finger paintings on the fridge.”

“At least I had something on the fridge. Even Rome had his arrest warrants. You didn’t even have a magnet.”

“Luca,” I gave him a look. He knew damn well that paper certificates were a sore point with Bastion. “Anyway, Bastion had that art sculpture on the mantelpiece.”

That gave me and Nik regular heart attacks every time we saw it in the dark. Which, thanks to the twins never sleeping, was every fucking night.

I looked back, trying to see Madeline. This was longer than two minutes.

Bastion clicked his fingers, “Right, which got broken because of you,” he shot a glare at Luca, “You and Nik just had to play catch near it.”

I was sure Nik did it on purpose. He was never that bad at throwing a ball. But he had to break it on the night I was home.

Bastions wailing at six years old was ear deafening. It’s a miracle I can still hear at all.

“I’m going to check on Madeline,” I got up. “Do you two want anything?”

“No, but,” Bastion finished his drink, “tell Nik to get off the phone if you see him. We’re hungry and sick of waiting for him.”

Fair enough. I nodded, moving through the restaurant. Where was my wife? I looked along the bar, my mood instantly changing when I saw two men talking to her.

Don’t be overprotective. She’s capable, smart, and deals with actually dangerous men for a living. She could handle two tourists. Still, these two fuckers had kept her from me. Perhaps we made a mistake opening the resort up to the public.

One of the men dropped something or pretended to. As he kneeled, his phone camera pointed up while the other kept her talking.

I stood on his phone, his smug expression changing, as he glared at me, slowly standing up. “What the fuck man, you’re on my phone.”

“Your phone was pointed at my wife.”

I waited for him to deny it. But he just smirked. Vile. Unmannered men. The lowest on the food chain.

“Get your drinks and fuck off,” Both smart enough to listen, and he didn’t try to get his phone off me.

He was lucky my wife had taught me to breathe, otherwise he’d be through the fucking bar. Instead, I’d handle it later. See how they liked being filmed and exploited.

“My love, did you get your drink?” I held her side, watching as they walked away. I’d have to get their room numbers off the front desk.

“That’s so annoying. Normally I see it.” She sighed. The lack of shock in her eyes really fucking disturbed me. “Oh, I’ve already finished that one. I want another.”

Gently, I touched her cheek, holding her head back. “Is everything okay?” she doesn’t normally drink so much.

“I told my uncles; they, um, didn’t take it well.”

If she didn’t love them, it would be easier for me to handle it. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I just want to forget about it for a bit.”

I nodded. But come tomorrow, if she is still worked up. We were talking about it.

CHAPTER 42

Madeline

The little things slowly became normal again. My heart swelled as I stared at my engagement ring.

I really didn't deserve another one. Not after what Mom had done to my last one.

Looking through the crowd, Vince was still yelling at Bastion. He ran his hand over his head, the muscles in his neck bulging as he yelled at his brother. It was hard to feel sorry for Bas when seeing Vince this angry turned me on.

God, I had a problem.

He glanced in my direction; his eyes locked with mine. He kept talking to Bastion, but didn't look away from me.

I wasn't sure what I had done to deserve him.

Watching him as he walked towards me.

"Sorry, it took so long." His tattooed hand covered mine. "Are you finished?" he looked at the drink beside me. I hadn't even seen the bartender place it down.

I nodded, linking my fingers with his. Letting him pull me through the nightclub. He had argued with Bastion for nearly an hour, and in that time, the crowd here had doubled.

“So, are you finished for the night?” I asked as he held the car door open for me.

“No, Bastion has a mess. I need to clean up. Before Damius hears about it.” Holding his hand as I stepped up into the car. “The driver will take you home. I won’t be home until late.”

God. I shouldn’t feel so disappointed. I nodded.

“Sorry about dinner.” he pulled the seat belt around me.

I shrugged. I hadn’t liked the menu; it was nearly impossible to guess the calories.

“Good night, my husband.”

Kissing me so softly. “Good night, my wife,”

He winked at me before closing the door. Leaning my head against the window.

I already missed him. My home.

Vince's brothers had taken over our lounge room. What had happened I wasn’t sure, but the fact Vince had maybe three hours sleep and was back up. I assumed it wasn’t good. Knowing if they wanted to tell me, they would have. I kept my distance.

Glancing at my phone, an unknown caller. Uncle Cole must have something important to tell me.

They had blocked me out of all local deals since I told them I was stepping back.

This would be my last trip to handle the connection with the suppliers.

And for once. I didn't care that they were disappointed with me.

“Morning Uncle,” I turned the crackers over, reading the calories on the packet. Why couldn't Vince's chef get water crackers?

“Are you near Vincent?”

Odd question. “No. Vince is busy.” I looked up, making sure the sliding door was still closed. “Why? Do want to talk to him?”

“I am giving you a warning, Maddy, as you are now tied to them.”

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My stomach dropped.

“Alexander Adams died last night, along with thirty others. Apparently, the drugs were supplied through the Crows.”

“Are you sure it is the Alexander Adams? Maybe someone else with the same name?” pushing the packet of crackers away from me. My appetite is now gone.

“It was his birthday party. His fiancé has also been confirmed as dead.”

And it got worse. The Adams could take this as a targeted hit.

Well, that explained why they had been so busy this morning. I stared at the sliding doors. “I’ll handle the funeral acknowledgements from our family when they officially announce the deaths. Talk soon Uncle.”

I walked towards the black sliding doors. So much for keeping my distance from them. I knocked twice. Waiting until Vince said to come in.

Right now. I really regretted answering that phone. The tension in this room was intense. Staring at Vince, he looked exhausted. My poor husband.

“So, um, sorry to interrupt.” I looked between them. They all looked so tired. I was only about to make it worse. “Alexander Adams and his fiancé died at his nightclub. Apparently, there were dirty drugs at his birthday party.”

An explosion of yelling followed.

“Is there any word on his sister?” Luca asked, staring at Bastion. “She would have been at her brother's birthday.” They shared a look before both staring at me. The other three were too busy roaring at each other to notice the question.

Maybe they know Emilia. That would make sense; everyone knows everyone in our world.

“Um, I’m not sure. But I hope for our sake, she isn’t. Though if I was her, I would want to be.” I shivered just at the thought of what she would be facing. Their family was old school brutal.

Moving around them, I walked to Vince. Who was two seconds away from a physical fight with Nik.

“Maybe you all need a break and sleep?” I stepped in between them. “Seriously, this situation is fragile. Regroup tomorrow. There is nothing that can be done now, anyway.”

I was sure it took all Nik’s self-control to not shout at me to leave the room. The twitch of his jaw, the death glare between him and Vince.

“Maddy’s right, and we need to find out the full list.” Luca ran his fingers through his hair. “There could be more family dead.”

“The head of their family is dead because of us.” Nikolai turned his glare to Luca. “It can’t get any worse.”

“It could,” I added. Nik’s glare moved from Luca to me. He was intimidating. But talking to angry men when they weren’t rational was my specialty. “The death of one heir is easier than both. If Emilia is alive. There is room for a discussion.”

If Emilia was among the dead, my uncle would have known. So. That meant this could still be fixed.

“But if your response is heated, in the moment, accusations yelled from both sides. Emotions running high.” I shrugged, “Wouldn’t be the first gangland war started over a damaged ego and grief.”

Which is exactly why we all had time limits.

“Everyone, get the fuck out of our house.” Vince pulled me back to his chest. “Now.”

Bastion and Luca had already walked out. Nik waited a few moments longer before following. Rome, however, stayed, waiting for them to leave before turning to me.

“Did your uncle say we supplied the drugs?”

In other words, did everyone know they were responsible. I nodded.

He shared a look with Vince and left.

“Come to bed with me,” I turned, taking his hand. “I want to nap with you.”

He didn’t seem to buy it.

I went up on my toes, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Please, I’ve missed my home.”

He sighed. Giving in and picking me up.

CHAPTER 43

Vince

“Eight days,” I groaned. “It’s too fucking long.” I pulled her back to me, glaring at her phone. “Just let one of them go.”

“You know what that group is like. They are so secretive and no trust,” she laid back down on my leg, locking her phone. “Come on, one last time. You’ve handled me gone for a lot longer. Once it was nearly a month.”

I shrugged. “I can’t do it anymore.”

“So needy.” she took my hand, slowly running her nails over my tattoos. Like normal, she focused on the tattoo of her lipstick.

“Which team are you organizing to go with you?” I waited for her answer, but instead she seemed more focused on my rings. “Madeline. What team are you organizing to go with you?”

“The Huntley’s and their private crew.”

I could feel her eyes on me. I hated them. Fucking loathed their family. But they’d always kept her safe. The one time she nearly hadn’t come home was when she wasn’t with them.

It was so fucking conflicting for me. I felt better knowing they were with her. Yet. I hated them. Their parents murdered my mother. My uncles. My Aunts. Grandmother. All dead because of their family.

Now. The three remaining members of that family tree were responsible for protecting my wife. And they had always done a really good job at it.

I stared at the fire; I wouldn't blame their family for what I did. But if my father hadn't lost my mom, I wouldn't have killed him. The man he was after her wasn't the man that raised Nik and I.

“And you're out after this, right?” I looked from the fire to her. “No more warlords, or being the family's international representation?” I paused, “No more Huntley's.”

She squeezed my hand. “I'm out.” The corner of her lips twitched up. “My husband is really needy, but I'm worse.”

She knows how to make me weak. “Eight days.” I sighed, placing my empty glass down. “You'll follow the same rules as last time? Check-ins, trackers, satellite phones.”

“There is more likely a chance something would happen to me here than over there. And you know it.”

Deep down I know she is right, but the thought of her getting hurt at all, let alone out of my reach, just ate at me. It didn't matter how many trips she did, I never felt better about it. Though, this being the last one, that made this one easier to accept.

Eight. Long. Fucking. Days.

“I have to go,” she tried to kiss me again, but I reached for the door handle, stopping

her from getting out. “Vince,” she held my face, “I have to go.”

I glared out the tinted windows at the airplane. “Eight days. Promise me not one day longer.”

She gently kissed me one more time. “I promise.”

“You’ll call me when you land.” I traced her cheek. Normally I can control my anxiety about her leaving better.

“I will, and you can watch me, remember?” she kissed me again. “Now, you have to promise me you won’t be reckless while I’m gone.”

“I’m never reckless.”

“One time, you blew up a construction site over a minor miscommunication.”

I shrugged.

“Promise me you won’t be reckless, grumpy and you’ll sleep.”

I won’t sleep. I could guarantee I’d be in a foul mood until she got back and as for me being reckless. Well, she and I always had a different opinion on what that meant.

“Okay,” I sighed, letting go of the door handle.

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“Hold on to these for me,” she handed me her rings. “I am not risking them getting stolen.”

It took all my self-control not to pull her back into the car for a fourth time. This time, I let her kiss me and leave. As soon as she closed the car door, I felt uneasy, too much distance between us.

It only got worse as I watched her walk up the stairs.

Turning her rings in my hand. Eight days. We had done longer.

I hadn't eaten. I couldn't sleep.

One more day. I had to survive one more day until she was back.

Every day was painfully fucking slow, since I found that pregnancy test in the bin. Fucking positive.

“So, what the fuck was more important, Nikolai?” I stopped at the traffic lights. “Nothing is worth missing your doctor's appointment, and you know it!”

“Maybe I should take it up with the medical reception for breaking my privacy? They had no right to call you.”

“I don't pay them extra every week, not to call me when you miss appointments.” This habit he had of causing me undue stress. “I have enough on my plate without you having a third heart attack.”

Glaring at the red traffic light. Fucking positive. A positive fucking pregnancy test.

“I’ve booked back in. It’s not a big deal.”

“I know, we’re going tomorrow,”

“Unfucking believable. I have a casino to run, drugs to distribute. When is Maddy back so you can stop annoying me?”

The lights went green.

“She’s back tomorrow night. Your appointment is at nine in the morning. I’ll pick you up.”

One second, I’m listening to Nikolai's empty threats, the next I’m blinded by bright lights of a truck. Coming at me so fast, I didn’t have time to put my foot down.

CHAPTER 44

Nikolai

I stared at the hospital carpet. The room was eerily quiet. The only sound was the girls crying. Who were both sitting at opposite ends of the waiting room.

“It’s Damius,” Rome handed me his phone. I’d purposely fucking ignored mine. The old bastard had cost me enough time with my brother. He wasn’t taking the final hours.

But Rome wasn’t to know. I took the phone from him. “What?”

“My strongest Crow taken out by a truck. Is this true?”

He wouldn't be calling if he didn't know the answer.

“The Adams have claimed credit, retaliation for their heir, whose fault was that man's death again, Nikolai?”

I kept my breathing calm, locked on the carpet. “I'll handle it.”

“Laced drugs. Actions are always unaccounted for. Perhaps it is time to reconsider Villains leadership.”

Not even hours and he is already threatening to take what Vince, and I earned. Everything we sacrificed to control this fucking city.

“I said I will handle it. Anything else?”

“You are still my crow Nikolai. You and Vincent might have decided not to hold those so-called boys accountable. But I promise you. If my crow dies, because you two didn't train yours, I'm holding them accountable.”

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I got up, walking from the room. “Damius, you remember the deal. They aren’t yours.”

“Then I shall hold you responsible. My strongest Crow created three of the fucking weakest to carry the name.”

“You remember what Vince said? He created men, not crows.” I rubbed the center of my chest. That sharp pain back again.

“Weak men,” He clicked his tongue. “Vincent has carried your responsibilities for me long enough. You’ll step back in, understood?”

“Understood.”

“And Nikolai, the next debt you owe me. Will be repaid by returning me one of my granddaughters. So don’t insult your brother’s legacy by making all his sacrifices worthless.”

The call ended.

Holding my chest. I fought down the emotions. I can’t lose it right now. Later. I can lose it later.

I closed my eyes, trying to steady my breathing. He won’t leave me. He can’t fucking leave me with this city, the kids. This fucking chest pain.

“Nik?”

I turned, fighting back for my control. Before walking back to them.

Sofia was standing at the waiting room door. A white rush of panic came through me. I couldn't do this without him. He can't fucking leave me with them.

"Zeke is on the phone about Maddy. He wants to talk to you."

I nodded. "Can you give this phone back to Rome?" I exchanged phones with her. It would seem no one was fucking respecting my wish to not speak.

"Zeke."

"Maddy missed her chartered flight. From what we know now, something happened during the meeting. It would seem a power take over; they were caught in the middle."

My blood ran fucking cold. If she was dead. My brother was dead regardless, even if he survived that surgery.

"Given the terrain, it might take more time to get answers. We're already organizing a recovery team to go in."

Fuck.

How does this day keep getting fucking worse.

"Send the details to Marcel. We have contacts in that area."

"I'm not contacting that bastard."

"Do I need to remind you, Zeke, that Madeline is a Crow. Not a fucking Thorne." I loosened my tie, "I hope for your family's sake, she isn't hurt."

I ended the call. Before the bastard could gloat by asking about Vince.

Even if he survived the surgery. A coma. My brother in a fucking coma. How long did I let that be until I gave him mercy?

He would do that for me. But... I wasn't sure I had the strength to do the same.