



Volatile Love (The Gilded Sovereign 2)

Author: *Dani Rene*

Category: Romance, Adult, Horror

Description: I want to be Rukaiya's hero, but she's made it clear she can take care of herself. Her fire burns me. Her fierce nature lures me in. She's a wolf in sheep's clothing, and I want her to devour me. She enjoys defying me and I love to taunt her.

I always get the girl.
Every. Single. Time.
And this time is no different.

He's trying to be my knight in shining armor, but I don't need him to be. That's what I tell myself, anyway. Etienne doesn't give up easily. He's adamant to change my mind. Only, he doesn't realize that being with me could get him killed.

As I push, he pulls, and one of us is about to get wounded.
Secrets. Desire. Violence.
Our love is volatile.

When secrets are spilled, nobody is safe.

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Prologue

Present Day

Once I knew I was in this life for good, I promised myself I would never let anyone else in my family feel the impact of what's to come. I fought it; I asked and begged Abner to let Etienne go, but he refused.

The man is a monster.

And now my son is one of the Crowns.

At first, I thought he'd fall into the same trap we all did. But seeing him here, grown up, more mature than I could've ever expected, is far more jarring than if he'd been a party animal. When I left Tynewood, Etienne and his friends were always at the lake house drinking and having keggers and I worried about him. But then I realized it was normal teenage behavior, I'd done the same.

What concerned me more though was the thought of him turning into Abner Lancaster. Even though the man was a friend, I knew how much of an asshole he was. I knew he wasn't good.

My formative years were spent with Abner, and Tarian's uncle and mother, Thane and Yasmine. I knew all along I didn't want Etienne to be like me, or them in any way. We did things I'm not proud of, but Abner always took it a step too far by reveling in the violence, blackmail, and illegal activities that ultimately brought him down.

I never wanted my son to be burdened with the darkness that came with the Sovereign. Once you're sworn in, it's as if your soul is blackened with the filth that resides within the walls of the dungeons where our meetings are held.

Knowing how Abner tore apart the Tynewood faction only cements my need to break the whole Sovereign down, but I know it will never happen. As much as I want to deny that I wouldn't cross the line if I needed to, I can't. If it means keeping Etienne safe, I'll do anything. I pray with all I have that Etienne, Tarian, Ares, and Philipe will find a way to change the filth that's plagued the society and turn it into something good. Something worthy of being a part of.

As much as I hate being a Crown, I can't forsake what I've worked so hard to accomplish. Lifting the glass to my lips, I take a long sip of the deep crimson liquid. Port has been my drink of choice for a long while, and I savor the sweetness and burst of flavors that hit my tongue.

The office is silent, and I close my eyes for a moment to soak up my aloneness. It's not often I get the chance to be with my own thoughts. Running the London wing of the Sovereign has its pitfalls, one of them being that I'm always watched by the men who I govern.

It's been a long time since I first walked into this room and took the seat at the head of the table. When the man who I worshipped ran this place, it felt as if we were in the army—he ruled with an iron fist. But the day he died, a part of this manor house went with him.

I've lived here for almost seven years, and I swear I still feel his presence. As if his ghost still walks amongst the carpeted halls. Every step that creaks, each window that affords a view of the vast grounds make it feel as if I'm living in a museum.

A knock at the office door draws my attention to the heavy wood. It's a soft sound,

one that lets me know who's on the other side without hearing her voice.

“You know you don't have to knock,” I call to her. When my wife told me to choose between her and the Sovereign, I walked out. I prayed that Etienne would find something to occupy his time and mind that didn't involve the Crown, but the wish was futile. I should've brought him with me, but I couldn't take him away from his friends.

When the door slides open, Maisy walks in. Long dark hair flows down her back, the wide blue eyes that I've come to love pierce me with questions, but I can't give her any information as to why I'm hiding in the office.

I had promised her father I wouldn't let her get too involved in the society. I couldn't allow her to get hurt. Even though she knows about the Sovereign, after her father died and I took his place, I kept most of the dealings contained in the office, locked up tight.

“I missed you in bed,” she tells me, settling herself on my lap, taking my glass and sipping the alcohol. At thirty, she looks closer to twenty-one. With smooth, creamy skin, blemish-free and perfect, she's like a doll.

“I needed to finish up some paperwork,” I tell her. “Etienne is coming to the manor tomorrow.”

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Her gaze snaps to mine. She knows I have a son. I was upfront when we met, but she's always been scared that he'll think she's trying to take his mother's place. Frankly, I think he'd be happy with a woman he can talk to other than my ex-wife.

Hilary is nothing more than a goddamned alcoholic. But then again, I feel responsible for pushing her down that path. I wasn't the perfect husband, but she was never the woman I should've married.

"I look forward to meeting him," Maisy tells me eagerly, and I can tell she's not just saying that, because the truth is right there in her sky-blue gaze. She settles herself against me, handing me the tumbler before twining her arms around my neck.

I feel myself respond to her softness and warmth, but I don't take her. Not tonight. There's a war waging inside me, and it's best I not do anything to hurt her. Violence runs rampant in my bones, deep to the very marrow of my being.

That's where my son and I are different. We're polar opposites, always have been. Silence hangs in the air between us, and I'm waiting for her to bring up a baby. Every time I've ever spoken about Etienne, she's asked about us having a child of our own.

But that's one thing I vowed to never do again. I can't have another child because the moment I do, he or she will belong to the Sovereign, and I can't take a chance that the child will turn out like me.

Closing my eyes, I inhale Maisy's perfume before I set the glass down and scoop her up. Making my way out of the office, I carry her to our bed and set her down on the mattress.

“Sleep,” I tell her, and without debate, her eyes flutter closed. If only she knew that love is nothing more than a volatile emotion. It burns and rages inside you until there’s nothing left and you’re a slave to it.

Now all I have to do is convince my son to go back to Tynewood and hope the secrets I swore to keep when I walked out stay buried.

But secrets have a way of escaping, no matter how deep you hide them.

1

Etienne

Two weeks earlier

Rolling over on the plush mattress, I focus on the geometrical patterns in the ceiling that loom over me. The alarm clock glares at me with bright red numbers, informing me that it’s not even six yet. I should get up, but I don’t feel like moving. Last night, I ordered room service and drank a bottle of Jack on my own. Thankfully, the Brits have my poison fully stocked in the hotel.

Even though there’s an apartment in the city I can crash at, I don’t because I need quiet. And staying with Dad is not an option. I hate being around people when I’m anxious. It only makes it worse. I can’t concentrate; I can’t focus, and right now, I need to find out where my girl is. I already consider her mine because I laid claim to her when Ares and I first saw her and her friend Dahlia.

I scoot onto my side, glancing over to the window. It’s still somewhat dark, and I already hate that I’m here in winter. I remember visiting as a kid, my dad bringing me to the city and telling me how exciting it is because London is full of history.

At the time, I wasn't overly impressed with London and all it had to offer. My best friends were back in the US, and all I wanted to do was spend time with them, learning about the secrets that Ares's dad hid in his library.

We found books about secret societies and reading those made me antsy, wondering if I'd ever get to become one of the important men in the country. I wanted to be someone, a hero of sorts. And I knew the only way was to have the strength of my brotherhood behind me.

These groups were dangerous, that much I knew. They had too much power, and when men have iron fists, ruling over those they perceive as lowly, is never a good thing.

At the time, we were sixteen and thought the world revolved around us. We made plans about what we would do if we ever joined the Gilded Sovereign, a society that our fathers attempted to hide from us, but they had let a few things slip through the cracks.

Instead of being assholes like our dads were, we were going to get all the girls. Build a harem and drink all the whiskey we could while playing X-Box. A chuckle vibrates in my chest at the thought. We were so goddamned innocent back then, thinking that being a Crown was an honor. Now, though, we know what it entails—violence, bloodshed, and power—all which Abner used to hurt innocent people.

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One of those people I'm here to save. Rukaiya Harrison is the reason I'm lying in a bed in London. Following her here was more for me than for Dahlia. As much as I care for my best friend's girlfriend, I'm being selfish because I want to find Rukaiya and steal her for myself.

Shoving off the bed, I make my way to the window. There aren't any curtains to obstruct my view. The gray skies hang heavily with the promise of rain and cold.

I stare out at the skyscrapers of one of the busiest cities in Europe. There's no noise from this high up, but I can see the people racing down the street, the cars and cabs all vying for a spot in the busy early morning traffic.

Meeting my father last night, I realized just how much I missed him. Even though he made sure my life was a comfortable one, I needed him more than the money he ensured was in my bank account. Granted, most kids would prefer the dollars to someone giving them advice about life, but that's not me.

I've always hungered for human connection. And perhaps that's why I found it in places that, at times, got me into trouble. It started when I was sixteen. My mother walked in on me fucking our maid. The twenty-three-year-old wasn't complaining and neither was I, but mom wouldn't have her son fraternizing with the help. Those were her actual words.

She didn't care that I was older beyond my years at that point, all she worried about was that I would taint the blue blood she believed we had. Me—on the other hand—all I wanted was to feel needed, to feel loved.

Over the years, my yearning for family came from the companionship I found with Ares and Tarian. They were the brothers I never had, and they never judged me the way my mother would.

Growing up in a small town like Tynewood didn't offer much privacy, so anything I did, got back to her one way or another, except for the one thing that I managed to hide from her and even from my best friends. My mother's incessant nagging had me wanting to run away from home, and I found solace at the Lancaster mansion more times than I care to count.

Ares had his father, but he wasn't around often, and it would allow us to just be. There wasn't this innate need to impress anyone, which my mother was a great fan of doing.

When I turned eighteen, Dad came back and gave me the choice—live in London with him and his new floozy or stay in Tynewood with my friends and attend school here.

I decided to stay and join the society that I know my mother was against all my life, but I knew I was the only one to step into my father's shoes. I was convinced that I had made the right decision. I wanted to be in Tynewood because it was the only place that I felt I belonged. It was where my brothers were, and I wasn't leaving them. And it was time to become the man I was born to be—a Crown.

I joined the Gilded Sovereign at twenty-one, only eight months ago. My mother stopped caring about the society. It was as if she accepted it was real, that I had to be one of the chosen. She never mentioned it again, which still has nervous energy coursing through me. I don't know why Hilary Durand decided to leave it be, and that's another mystery I need answered.

Now, I'm in London, looking at the sky as the sun rises, and I'm about to meet with

the Sovereign which my father heads up in Britain. Each major city in the world houses a sector of the Sovereign. It will be the first time I attend a meeting with Elders like this, and I'm looking forward to it.

I'm also chomping at the bit to find Rukaiya. The men my father has looking for her have come back empty-handed. They haven't spotted her yet, but we're not sure why her father, Fergus Harrison, would've taken his daughter if he was on the run. She's over eighteen, so it's not like she's underage and needs him to watch over her.

I have a feeling there's more to this story than meets the eye. And I plan on getting to the bottom of it. I know Tarian has his ticket and will be flying out soon enough.

Once he arrives, we'll have to get to Rukaiya before she's hurt in some way. I don't trust Fergus, and from the background information we have on him working for Abner Lancaster, Ares's Dad, I have a feeling he's capable of anything.

Tarian also needs to know his uncle may be involved. I'm not sure what he has to do with it just yet, but something doesn't sit right with me.

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My phone vibrates on the table in the dining room, and I make my way over to grab it. What I find waiting for me is a confirmation email for tonight's meeting with the rest of the Sovereign in Westminster.

It's only six in the morning, and I haven't had enough coffee yet, so instead of getting ready for the day, I head into the kitchen and flick the switch on the Keurig, setting a large mug under the drip and waiting for it to fill up.

I've been tense all night, the sleep I had wasn't nearly enough, and I'm feeling out of sorts. All I kept picturing was Rukaiya in danger.

Even though I only had a short time to get to know her—I was fascinated by her. Long blonde braids that hit her waist. Curves that had me licking my lips each time she sashayed by me. And those large, round green eyes, and her pouty, pink lips that I kept picturing around my cock.

I haven't been obsessed with anyone before. Not like this. The need to protect her is fierce, but her pushing me away only makes me want it more. It's not just the need to get my dick wet, it's... more.

Sighing, I lift the mug, taking a sip of the fresh brew before I head back into the living room where my laptop is waiting on the coffee table. I pick it up, lift the lid, and open my email. Perhaps reading through the information Dad sent will take my mind off the anxiety that's twisting in my gut. And I wonder if this is the calm before a major fucking storm.

Etienne

I'm stepping out of the shower when a knock sounds at my door. Wrapping a towel around my waist, I make my way into the living area and lean in to check who it is through the keyhole. There, on the other side of my door is Rukaiya.

She's got her hair pinned at the back of her head, making her face and delicate neck more prominent, which doesn't help my cock from pulsing with need. I want to mark her smooth skin, more than it's already colored in with the tattoos she has snaking their way around her shoulders.

Pulling open the door, I hide my body, but gift her a smirk. I'm met with her green eyes that look like gemstones as they pierce me with a shrewd glare.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" I question slowly, watching her with piqued interest. I hope to turn her feisty, so I can enjoy the tension between us.

"You know what I'm doing here. You shouldn't be here." Her voice is tight with tension, and I wonder if she's worried her father will find out I'm in London. To be honest, I don't give a shit, that asshole is going down. We're just waiting on proof, and he'll be taken out, just like he's meant to be.

"You found me, so I'm not sure you're supposed to be here," I tell her, before I step aside and swing my arm toward the room, enticing her to enter. When she does, she makes her way to the sofa, but it's only when she sits and I shut the door that she notices I'm only wearing a towel.

Her gaze drinks me in slowly, starting at my bare feet, trailing its way up to my hips, over my abs and chest, before landing on my questioning stare.

"What?" She bites out, her cheeks darkening considerably, and I can't help but

chuckle. She's cute. I love making her nervous, and I'm certainly making a show of doing it with barely anything on.

"I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

Closing the distance between me and the couch, I lean against the door frame to the bedroom, causing her gaze to flit over my shoulder, and I know she can see the bed in the corner of the room. It's like a mini apartment, and I love knowing she's in such close proximity to my naked body and a bed where I can easily lay her down and feast on her.

"I came here to tell you to leave," she informs me, crossing her arms in front of her chest, as if she's closing herself off to any more confrontation. I want to do more, make her see that I'm here to protect her, not to hurt her, but I can't do that if she doesn't trust me.

"Look," I sigh, pushing off the frame, "I'm here to sort out Sovereign shit. And don't tell me you don't know what that is because you and I both know your father is a member." Heading to the bar fridge, I grab two bottles of water and hand one to Rukaiya. I expect her to refuse, but she accepts with a nod.

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“You need to go home, forget about me, and all this will be okay.” I watch her press the bottle to her lips. The action of her pouty lips makes all sorts of filthy images pop into my mind, and I have to turn away before she notices my slowly hardening shaft.

“I can’t leave. I’m a sworn Crown.”

“My father is not going to stop his plan,” she mutters, pushing off the couch and turning to the window. I watch her for a moment, taking in the soft curves that are hidden by her dark jeans and the black hoodie that I know hides a perfect set of tits. I’ve only ever seen her in tight tank tops before which is enough to give me a good idea of what she’s hiding.

“I don’t give up that easily, Rukaiya.” My tone is filled with a warning. One that I hope she doesn’t ignore because I don’t want to walk away from this and see her get hurt. As much as she fights me, I crave to see her finally submit. To admit her feelings for me, the ones I see dancing in her eyes, but she’s too damn stubborn to admit.

“I’m not weak. I’m not some little sheep waiting to be slaughtered,” she bites out, turning her green eyes on me. They’re filled with fire and determination, and every second that she locks those orbs on me turns me inside-fucking-out.

“So, you’re the wolf?” Arching a brow at her, I grin, picturing her as a shifter of sorts. She’d be beautiful as a majestic creature—green luminous eyes, soft golden fur, and a bite that could take any man out.

“If you want to call me that I wouldn’t be averse to it.”

Nodding, I stalk toward her, we're inches from each other, and I could easily kiss her. But I have a feeling if I do, she'd knee me in my junk, leaving me to crawl after her.

"I have to go, he'll be watching me, and if I don't get back, I'll lose the progress I made." Her voice wavers as her stare lingers on mine, then slowly tracks its way down to where my towel hides my growing erection. Being this close to her isn't doing me any favors.

"How are you so young, yet so fucking perceptive?"

"It took me a long time to learn. Growing up with a father like Fergus Harrison was challenging. Even as a kid, I had to make sure I was one step ahead of him."

"Did it work?"

She's silent, as if contemplating telling me more, confessing the pain she's already been through. I want to pull her into my arms and tell her it's going to be okay, but I don't want to make a promise I'm not sure I can keep.

Rukaiya shakes her head, deciding against saying anything more. She turns and walks to the door. I don't follow. I prefer watching her when she walks away.

Her hand on the doorknob stills, casting a glance over her shoulder, she tells me, "Stop trying to save me, Etienne. I'm not a damsel, I don't need a knight in shining armor." And with that, she's gone.

Fuck.

I should go after her, stop her from going back to that asshole, but she's determined to do this on her own. Perhaps I can allow her to think she's alone, but still be her fucking shadow and when she least expects it, I'll make myself known.

Making my way into the bedroom, I pick up the phone and dial Dad's number. It rings twice before a woman answers in a soft voice, "Isaac's phone, how can I help you?"

"Put my father on the phone," my voice is filled with annoyance that he has his new plaything answering his calls. She doesn't sound like she's much older than I am, which only makes me even more irate that he left me for a life with some young piece of ass.

"Hello?"

I don't bother with a greeting; instead, I question, "Who's that?"

"Etienne," he says my name as if it's a surprise I'm calling him, which is such bullshit. Frustration ebbs through me, burning every nerve in my body. I want to punch something. At times, I can understand why Ares loves the ring so much. When you need to hit something, it comes in handy.

"I'm not a child anymore; you don't have to shelter me from your life, Dad." I know he can hear the anger that's laced on every word I mutter, but knowing him, he won't bite.

"She's my assistant, Etienne. I'm at the office, where I work," he speaks to me as if I'm still an annoying little ten-year-old begging him for my allowance. Or a new X-Box, or something else that will distract me from him and mom's fighting.

"I need more information on the Harrison girl," I tell him, not bothering to answer him about his assistant. "Her father is up to something, and I don't trust the prick." My voice is filled with ice when I think about Fergus.

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“I have his emails and bank statements; I’m just waiting on his phone records. When you get here, I’ll have them ready for you to go through.”

I nod, but I know he can’t see me. “He needs to go down.”

“Is this about him or the girl?”

My father’s question catches me off guard, and I want to tell him about Rukaiya, my little wolf, but I don’t mention her.

“I’ll see you in an hour.” I hang up before he can say anything more. And my non-answer may have given him the response he wanted, but I no longer give a shit right now.

3

Etienne

Present day

I recall the moment my life changed.

I was fifteen.

Heartbreak held me in an icy grip when I watched my father pack his bags and drag them down the staircase. I escaped to my bedroom in time to see him shove them into the trunk of his Lexus SUV. He glanced over his shoulder, meeting my pained stare

through my bedroom window. Seeing the defeat in his eyes was too much for me to bear. He'd finally given in to my mother's constant nagging for him to choose.

She didn't want him to be a Crown. She didn't agree with the way he lived his life, but even then, he never asked her to change. And he could've. I didn't understand it at first. I questioned why he would walk out when all he had to do was tell her he's unhappy. He could make her see that her actions pushed him away, and his focus became the Sovereign instead of his family.

The moment he was gone, she became the type of mom I never thought she could be. But, then again, it was only when my friends were over. She enjoyed having Ares and Tarian here, so she could fawn over them.

When my father walked out, my mother blamed me. There's one thing I learned about her in those early years, she enjoyed keeping up appearances. None of her friends knew Dad left; she would tell them he was away for work, or he had important matters to deal with in London.

Home was in Tynewood, but I never felt as if I belonged. That is until I met my two best friends. They offered me a safe haven from the shit I had going on at home; only, they didn't know how bad my mother was.

I guess I'm more like her than I care to admit. I'm keeping up the appearance of the perfect son, but deep down, I know I'm far from it. I realized that love is not something you can buy with the millions we have in our bank account. It's also not something that can be forced. If it were, my folks wouldn't be living half a world away from each other.

Dad was always a prideful person; he never allowed his feelings to show. Ever. And that's where he went wrong. But it all came crashing down when he told mom she wasn't the woman he married. Of course, she'd changed. She was older, a mom,

someone who spent her mornings at the salon getting her gray hair colored and afternoons at the local bistro drinking wine with her friends.

Dad didn't like it.

Mom didn't care.

I grew up with role models who showed me just how volatile love can be. They didn't hurt me. It was how they treated each other. With disdain, frustration, and anger.

I vowed to myself to never fall in love.

All it brings is unhappiness and heartache, that's what my folks taught me.

It shouldn't be easy to love or to hate someone. It should be challenging, demanding, and it should push you outside your comfort zone. Questioning your sanity at times.

But before you can ever love someone else, before you can give them your heart and soul, you need to accept who you are. You should love yourself before you can ever have someone to share your life with. And I don't know if I'm someone who could ever do that. I may want to save Rukaiya, I may care about her, but I wonder if I'll ever be able to give her all of me, to love her because I certainly don't fucking love myself.

As much as I truly believe that, I also found out early in life that emotions are merely things to hold us back from what we truly want. Growing up, I always got what I wanted. Every girl I flirted with would drop her panties within hours of meeting me. Whenever I needed a good grade, I'd get it, without putting in too much effort.

Life was easy as the son of one of the founding families in Tynewood. The Durand

name gifted me privilege; it offered me opportunities to work anywhere in the world, to do anything I wanted.

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The world was my oyster; I had everything I could dream of, until the moment she walked into my town, challenging me with every conversation I attempted, and then she disappeared without a trace.

And that's why I find myself in London—a world away from Tynewood—to find the beauty who's caused my insanity. Strolling into the old building, I take in the river, which twinkles with lights from the city above it. Tonight, I meet the Sovereign in London; I'll sit at their table to find out just where the exotic beauty has disappeared to.

I'll find her.

And when I do, I'm taking her back to where she belongs—Tynewood.

4

Rukaiya

It started when I was five. Listening to the arguing, I would shut my eyes, hide under the sheets, and hum to myself. With every fight they had, I thought the world would come to a standstill. I prayed it would.

Dad was an asshole, there was no mistaking it. Even when he landed the job as a cop, he still acted as if everyone owed him something. I came to hate my father when I turned sixteen, and he made sure I would serve drinks at his poker games. His friends would leer at me, chuckling when I would race out of the room.

Which is why I spent most of my nights at my best friend's house.

The only man I knew wasn't a pervert was Patrick. My best friend's dad was friendly enough, but he was far too locked up in his own mind to even pay me and Dahlia any attention.

I never told anyone about my home life. It wasn't their business. Why would I spew shit about what I was going through when someone else was probably going through something worse?

I used to be the 'suffer in silence' type. And it worked well for me over the years until Dad refused to let me go to Tynewood. I wanted to go to University with Dahlia, not be watched as I attempted to enjoy my college years. I begged and pleaded until he finally relented. And I thought he'd allow me to go on my own, but I couldn't escape him.

Momma did though. She was clever enough to die. I shouldn't say it like that, but it's true. The night I found her in our bathroom is forever ingrained in my mind. I was only ten. Too young to do anything to help. The blood that soaked through the grit in the tiles, the stench of metal that I could never rid myself of still haunts me.

She left me to fend for myself, and I did. I learned how to protect myself by going to self-defense classes. When Dad was undercover, I would visit the local gym, which wasn't far from our house, and I learned how to fuck men up that were double my size.

I was doing well.

I could survive.

I didn't need a goddamned knight in shining armor. I was strong and independent.

Only, my father didn't know anything about that part of me. He only thought of me as his fragile little girl. I allowed him to believe it. What he doesn't know won't hurt him.

Right?

Wrong.

My father knows how to dole out punishment, and mine was normally being locked up tight, so nobody could come near me. Nobody but Dahlia. I never understood why he wasn't against our friendship. We drifted toward each other since he worked with her dad, but I knew there was more to it. Perhaps it was a sixth sense, or something like that, but I could read my father like a book. When he was planning something, it was so clearly written on his face. That dark satisfaction of a plan coming together.

Two months ago, I learned the truth about who Fergus Harrison really is. I was stupid because I trusted him. Even through all his outbursts and the way he would react to me and mom, I still loved him.

But it wasn't real.

None of it was.

The Society he was a part of brought darkness into our lives, and now I'm here, in London, helping my father to bring down Isaac Durand. My twentieth birthday is coming up, and I have a feeling my father wants me to do more than just smile as I serve drinks and act like the elegant lady at the society's parties.

Deep in my heart, I know he's going to use me as a pawn. His love isn't as pure as I thought it was. Fergus Harrison was my mother's worst mistake, and now I'm having to deal with the aftermath of that choice.

With quick steps, I try to focus on the here and now, on getting to my destination. The city is busy today as I head toward what looks like a more modernized area with glass buildings and high rises, Canary Wharf.

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London is something else: it's beautiful and old with buildings that I want to explore. I've always loved history and being in such an ancient place is exciting. I just wish I was here under better circumstances.

The buildings in this part of London are all glass and metal. But near the wharf itself, open brick apartments line the river. Their balconies overlook the water, and I wonder just how magical it must be at night when the lights dance along the dark surface.

The building I enter is where I'm meeting Dad. He's with the rest of the Sovereign who run things in the UK, and even though they're a larger society than the one in Tynewood, they still obey the rules set out by the four men back home.

The slate walls and floor to ceiling windows make the place feel modern, but the further into the bowels of the property you go, the open brick shows evidence that this is one of those older buildings.

As the elevator takes me up to the top floor, I think about Tynewood. About school. I'm not sure how much longer I'll be here, but I want to finish my degree, one way or another. And I want to do it at home—in Tynewood. I never thought I'd ever consider a place as home if it weren't D.C., but knowing I left my best friend back there makes my heart ache. She must hate me for running away; I just wish I could let her know I'm okay.

The problem is, any move I make, Dad will find out. It's as if he's tracking me. The metal doors slide open, depositing me in a long brightly lit hallway. At the far end, I notice a door that's currently shut, but it's the only exit on this floor. My heart

thumps in my chest, but as much as anxiety is twisting in my gut, I follow the hallway toward the waiting doorway.

I knock once, twice, and a third time. It's the way Dad showed me. As soon as it opens, I'm met with the familiar gaze of Etienne Durand. The one person I didn't want to know where I was.

"Etienne?"

"I need answers," he tells me, before stepping aside and allowing me to enter the penthouse, which takes up the whole top floor. "And I need them before we walk in there." His voice is low, a threat hanging between us.

I can't look at him or I'll lose my nerve. His face covered in dark stubble makes my fingers itch to touch it. To feel him against me, but I know this will never work between us.

Meeting his dark eyes, I silently plead with him to leave this. But the more I stare at him I know he'll never give up. I move to walk by him, but he's fast, his hand shooting out to grab my arm. I turn my attention to the man who is chipping away at my walls and pin him with a glare.

"Not now. Not here."

He releases me when I tug my arm free. As I walk away, I feel his eyes burning into my back, and for just a moment, I toy with him by swaying my hips left and right as I walk into the office, which sits on the opposite side of the entrance and the living room.

Time to learn about Daddy and his cronies.

Etienne

Settling at the table, I can't keep my eyes off her. Long blonde dreads hang down her back, the smooth, caramel skin that taunts me from under the white tank top she's wearing causes my blood to heat.

"It's nice to see you here today," my dad, Isaac, smiles over at her. From the information Dad gave, I've learned about her past.

Her mother, an exotic film star from India, moved to London when she was shooting a movie. She met Fergus, fell in love, and moved to America not long after filming finished.

We know her mother died, committing suicide when Rukaiya was very young. Rukaiya had found her mother in the bathtub, her wrists torn from an old razor blade with blood everywhere. That's when Fergus ended up joining the police force. He went undercover, leaving Rukaiya with the nannies he'd hired.

What we don't know is how he links up with Abner. I glance at the asshole as frustration burns in my veins at not being able to grab him by the throat and squeeze tight. I want to see him take his final fucking breath for what he did to both Rukaiya and her mother.

"Can we get started?" Fergus mutters, his sneer at me doesn't go unnoticed. What he doesn't realize is that I don't give a shit who he is, I'll kill him right now without blinking. "I don't see why your son has to be present, this is business for the London Sovereign."

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“It doesn’t matter which country you go to, I’ll be there, because I don’t trust assholes like you,” I tell him, leaning forward, my hands clenched into fists at the balls on this fucker.

“Etienne,” my dad says in a warning tone, so I simmer down, but not by much. There’s nothing I can do to Fergus right now, but if I ever see him doing shit to hurt Rukaiya, he’ll pay with blood. “Let’s get started.”

“Abner has been taken in, he won’t be seeing the light of day again,” I inform the table. There are six men surrounding it, including my father and Fergus. Rukaiya’s gaze lingers on me for a moment, and I can’t stop a smirk from curling my lips. The moment she notices it, she turns away. Her cheeks darken with a rosy hue. Fuck, she’s beautiful.

“And where does that leave the Tynewood Sovereign?” One of the other men questions, leaning his elbows on the table.

“Philippe has taken his father’s place. As it was meant to be, no matter where Abner is.” I shove the paperwork across the table to the man who asked me the question. I don’t know any of their names, but I’ll learn soon enough.

“That’s fine,” Dad says, “and what are you going to do when it comes to the other societies? Philippe will have to visit each one in person.”

“He’s planning that, we just needed to make sure Tynewood was secure before we even considered that,” I tell him. The focus was always on the main arm of the Sovereign. The rest of the societies will have to wait. Besides the fact that they’ve all

heard about Abner's arrest, there hasn't been much drama. "And that's why I'm here."

The room was silent before, but right now, it feels like all the air has been sucked out of the space. I wonder if they know I'm about to drop a bomb that will ensure this whole fucking society will be rocked.

"Fergus was working for Abner, undercover."

"What?" The man in question gasps in surprise, but his act is see-through. I'm sure everyone in the room can see it. "That's a joke, right?" His face turns bright red at the accusation; only, it's not a lie, and he knows it.

"Why would Etienne lie about something like this?" Isaac questions, turning his attention on Fergus who's practically spluttering at being the center of attention. This is what he wanted, so why not take it and run with it. Having one of the top Crowns paying you off should make him happy, but he knows he's in shit when my father says, "I've seen the bank statements, Harrison. Why don't you tell us what happened?"

"This is such bullshit," Fergus fumes, rising from his seat, knocking it back as it tumbles to the floor. "I don't have to explain myself to anyone."

"You are part of the Sovereign," Isaac reminds him, his voice calm and collected. One thing about my father is that he never loses his shit—not with his colleagues, or me and my mother. He emanates control in every aspect of his life, and I wish I could be like that. But the fire that burns in my veins scorches me far too strongly. "It is our business what you do with the money you are receiving from us."

I'm certain Fergus is about to lose his shit, as his face is turning a shade of beet red I've never seen before on a human, and it can't be healthy. Silence hangs in the air

like a lead weight. It's a dangerous, volatile cloud, and I'm sure it's about to implode all over us.

He turns to his daughter. "We're leaving." He doesn't touch her, but the invisible tether is there. She rises, silent and obedient. I'm tempted to stop her. I want to push her against the goddamned wall and claim her mouth with mine. I don't like that he has such a hold on her.

"Like fuck if you think you're walking out of here without explaining yourself." It's me who explodes. And it's not because he's being an asshole. No, my eyes are locked on the blonde beauty behind him. I'm selfish, she's mine. She's been mine since the moment I laid eyes on her in the quad back in Tynewood.

"You," Fergus sneers, his accent coming in thick and strong as he rounds the long table. From the corner of my eye, I can see Dad rising from his seat, but I offer a swift shake of my head. I don't need him to fight my battles. I've spent my life doing it myself, and right now isn't the time to appear weak. "You don't get to question me."

"Just because I'm younger than you does not mean I don't run this fucking society with the rest of the Crowns who sit at the head of the table." I saunter closer to him. The rest of the old stiffs stare with mouths gaped at the exchange. None of them are strong enough or have the balls to stand up to this asshole, but that's where I'm better. I am not afraid of dickheads who run their mouths off, steal shit from others, and murder without consequence.

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“Run this society? You, boy, are nothing but a scuff on my shoe. Why did you have Abner Lancaster arrested? Because he was doing a job, that’s what the Sovereign is here for, to protect their members.”

He is right, I can’t deny him that. We’re meant to keep the names of all the men within the Sovereign secret. Anything they do or say is kept behind the walls of the rooms they hold their meetings in.

“Now, I’m leaving,” he mutters, spittle flying from his mouth. The dark hair, with his pale skin, is a stark contrast to his overly green eyes. They match his daughter’s glare that’s currently pinned on me. Why is she angry? Oh right, I’m messing with her father. But fuck that, he doesn’t deserve anything. He sure as fuck doesn’t deserve her. Not at all.

“I’ll be watching.” The warning weighs the room down like lead, keeping everyone seated as if it’s an external force. But it doesn’t stop Fergus who tugs the door open violently, causing the hinges to squeak.

Rukaiya follows him, but she stops on the threshold, her head shaking slowly as she regards me, and then she’s gone. I’m not sure what that means, why she’s so adamant to protect an asshole like that, but I’m damn sure going to get to the bottom of it.

6

Rukaiya

Dad doesn’t look at me as we walk to the elevator and take it down to the garage.

Once we're in his SUV, he still doesn't speak, and I wonder if he knows Etienne likes me. It's obvious to me because he's been flirting with me non-stop, but I hope my father doesn't realize it because he'll try to hurt Etienne. And as much as Etienne annoys me, I can't deny I'm attracted to him.

Even when I tried to warn the asshole from coming here, from meeting with my father, he still stayed. Which could mean one of two things—he's stupid or he really does like me. I can't think why else he'd be here fighting for me. But that doesn't matter because either will get him killed.

We weave through the traffic before coming to a halt as we head toward the river. The sun is hidden behind clouds, and the rain trickles quietly on the windshield. It's not a storm outside, but inside, the threat of an impending tornado hangs heavily in the air.

I want to say something, to gauge his reaction, but I don't. Instead, I sit quietly, looking out at the other cars and wondering what the people in them are talking about. The silence is deafening, and for the first time in my life, I wish my father would just scream and shout because the silence is worse than his rages.

When we finally pull into the parking garage, dad kills the engine and turns toward me. His eyes glowering angrily, and I know I'm in for it. I shouldn't cower but instinct makes me. My body is already trembling when he reaches for me. His hand tangling in my hair as he tugs me toward him.

“You go anywhere near that boy, and you'll both see the bottom of the fucking river. You're here to complete a job for me. Understand?”

I attempt to nod, but his hold on me is vise-like. I've never seen him like this, livid, fueled by hate. Granted, my father has never been one for love or cuddling, but he's never been evil.

“If I ever see you around that boy, I’ll make sure he never sees the light of day again.” His threat hangs between us, so I nod, praying with all I have that Dad doesn’t realize I have feelings for Etienne.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about. I’m here to finish the job you need me to do,” I tell him, hoping he’ll listen, hoping he’ll believe me. I’ve lied to him before, and this time is no different. The moment I can escape, I’ll run. If I can get away from all the men in my life, I’d be happier.

But that means running from Etienne, and, inadvertently, it also means running from Dahlia. Perhaps once I’m free, I can let her know I’m alive, that I’m safe and happy. But until then, I can’t allow my father to see any weakness.

“Good.” He releases me, and I can’t help but drag in a deep breath. My lungs fill with air, but there’s no calm that follows. Instead, I’m met with a resounding tension that will not leave me as I make my way to my bedroom.

Once I’m alone, I flop on the bed and pull out my phone. Swiping through my social media, I smile at the high school photos of me and Dahlia being dorks. We’ve been best friends for longer than I can remember, and she’s always had my back.

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I miss my best friend.

If only my life wasn't as fucked up as it is.

Dahlia was lucky; her dad was killed. I watched the coffin sink into the ground, and I held her as she cried. Sometimes, I wish it was my father who we buried instead of Patrick. Perhaps if it were Fergus lying six feet under, I'd have a normal life, studying for my degree and enjoying my young life in a small town. Maybe, just maybe, I'd have a boyfriend.

Etienne.

Shaking my head, I roll over and close my eyes, pretending I'm not here. I fantasize about being back in Tynewood with the people I've come to care for before my father stole me from a happy life and brought me to a place I'd rather die than live in.

Fergus has always been a monster. Hate brewed in my gut for him, year after year, and the older I got, the stronger the emotion became. After my mother died, I promised myself to be strong. She always told me I was a fighter, that I would get through everything, and I allowed my hate of the man who I called father to strengthen me further.

Each time he was near me I would watch him, decipher his moods by the tells he has. A nervous tick of drumming his fingers on the table, the way his mouth would curl in disgust when he was deep in thought. Certain things would push him over the edge, but I never did. Because I learned how to be around the volatile man.

My younger years were spent planning how I'd run, how I'd escape. Even now that he's taken me, brought me here, I know I'll find a way out. He may be my captor, but I'll become a predator.

I'll save myself.

And I'll make it back to Tynewood, one way or another.

A loud banging on the door startles me awake. I don't move. I can't because I have a feeling my father will kill whoever is on the other side. When the incessant racket doesn't stop, I sigh and push out of bed.

Barefoot, I make my way into the rest of the apartment to find it empty. A small note on the countertop tells me Dad is out at a meeting.

Another loud hammering on the wooden door and I'm already simmering with rage at whoever decided to wake me at... glancing at the red letters on the stereo, I note it's only seven in the morning, which makes me even angrier.

I don't look through the peephole before I pull open the door, only to be met with the beautifully transient gaze of Etienne Durand.

"Why are you here? I thought I made myself clear when you first tried to play the hero." My voice is filled with frustration. I hear it, and I know Etienne can hear it. I wish he would just leave because it would make all this so much easier.

"You know why I'm here." He stalks around the apartment, the same space my father just walked out of moments ago to head to a meeting. I'm not sure when he'll be back, but I can't take any chances by having Etienne here.

I watch Etienne, taking him in from head to toe, and I don't know what it is about

him, but he makes me nervous. I can't shake the feeling that if Etienne knew the truth about why I'm here, he'd hate me.

I wonder if he's already found out about what Fergus has done to me in the past. About the parties. The idea of him knowing fills me with shame and guilt.

And I don't know why I don't want him to hate me. That's a lie. I do know. It's because he makes my stupid teenage heart believe that he can save me. But fairytales aren't real, I've told Dahlia that since the moment I met her. My best friend would get lost in romance novels that had happy endings, but my life isn't fictional. As much as I wish it was.

"You should leave, Etienne," I tell him. Turning away, I head to the coffee machine and place a mug under the drip before flicking on the switch. I can feel Etienne watching me. His silence is jarring, and I briefly think about asking him to save me.

Befriending Dahlia was the first step of many that Fergus had planned. And now I'm here, locked in the apartment with nowhere to go until Daddy Dearest collects me for the poker game tonight.

Blackmail is the name of the game, and the moment he's got enough footage of these old assholes who like to grope teenage girls, he sends me on my way, and I'm meant to play the dutiful daughter.

Shutting down any fear, I face Etienne again, but I don't look him in the eyes when I say, "I need you to go back to Tynewood, and forget you ever met me." When I meet his dark chocolate stare, I can't help but want to get lost in it. I want him to look at me like he is right now for the rest of my life.

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“I can help you. We can help you,” he insists. I should never have let him into the apartment, but I didn’t have a choice. If one of my father’s men saw him, he’d be killed, and I can’t have Etienne’s life being stolen for caring about me.

Shaking my head, I turn away from him, staring down at the river that snakes through the city. The slow rising sun turns the horizon a bright orange, and the sky that cocoons the city of London lightens as the night turns to day.

“I’m not leaving until you tell me everything. And if you don’t, I’ll just wait here until your father comes back and confesses whatever the fuck you’re doing for him.”

“You really think my dad is going to tell you what his plan is?”

“He worked for Abner, which means he’s here doing something illegal.” Etienne’s right, but I don’t nod, I don’t respond, I allow him to come to his own conclusions. Even if I did tell him everything, he couldn’t do shit to save me.

7

Etienne

“You are the most annoying woman I’ve ever come across.” I watch her body tense, and I know I’m in for her fiery personality. If Ares thinks he has his hands full with Dahlia, he can think again because I’m here with a woman who I want to save, and she’s acting like a goddamned hero.

“And you are the most pigheaded man I’ve ever met,” she bites out, turning to face

me. Her long braids hang down her back, and there's a soft hue of orange behind her, lighting her smooth skin. The ink that adorns her arm is colored in various shades, but in this light, there's another hue that seems to pop against her caramel flesh.

"It's one of my better qualities," I tell her, chuckling when she rolls her eyes. She's got something that makes my body respond in ways I've never felt. And that's what fucking scares me. I made a vow to myself. I built these walls around me to stop my feelings from escaping, but Rukaiya is slowly chipping away at them—brick by brick.

"Are you even listening to me?" Rukaiya's voice breaks through my memories and drags me back to the present.

"What?"

She sighs audibly, the sound is soft, almost pained, and I'm tempted to go to her and wrap her in my arms, but I know she'll only push me away. So, I wait.

"I can't leave here until I've finished the ritual," she tells me.

My ears perk up at this new information. When we were seventeen, Ares and I found a few hidden volumes in his dad's library. Amongst them was a book of ceremonies that take place within the Sovereign where each of the sects will celebrate for lack of a better word. But no women are allowed. Ever.

"Ritual?" My voice cracks on the word, because the moment I say it, I come to the realization that there must be something we missed. Philippe was meant to research every fucking page of that book.

Rukaiya nods, her eyes lock on mine, and I see the pain in those beautiful gemstone orbs. She's scared. In the months that I've come to know her, I've never seen her

fearful, ever, but right now, in this room, she's shaking.

"And he's taking you into a Sovereign party?"

"Yes, in Amsterdam, I'm... I'm the entertainment," she finally admits.

I have no words as she stalks by me into what I assume is her bedroom. Moments later, she returns holding a pair of ballet shoes. She sets them down gently, along with a dress that's far too short for any public gathering.

"My outfit." She doesn't meet my gaze when she tells me this, but if she did look up, she'd see the rage that's slowly coursing through every vein in my body. "I'm meant to dance for them."

"This is fucked up," I bite out, my jaw ticking as I clench it so hard I'm sure my goddamned teeth are about to shatter. "You're not doing it."

Her stubborn gaze snaps to mine. "What?"

"You're not doing it. We will stop it before it's even begun," I tell her adamantly. "I'm not letting you go up there and prance around like a fucking doll on display for those assholes."

"You're not letting me?" The girl is gone in the next second and then I'm met with my little wolf. She's about to devour me whole for saying what I did, but I'm not apologizing. She's mine. The thought slams into me before her hand makes contact with my face. Hard.

"What the fuck?"

"You don't let me do anything. I'm capable of taking care of myself," she grits

through clenched teeth, and I swear to god, I almost see her snarl at me.

“Oh, little wolf, you have so much to learn.” I offer her a smirk before turning on my heel and heading for the doorway. And just like I thought, she’s racing up behind me within seconds. By the time I reach the handle and twist it, her small, delicate hand is on mine.

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“What did you mean by that?” She speaks to my back, and as much as I’d love one more glance of her, to take her in for another moment longer, I don’t.

“Just what I said.” I pull open the door and step outside. With my back still to her, I glance over my shoulder, allowing her to see my profile, but not far enough that she can see my eyes.

They say eyes are the windows to your soul. If she looked at mine right now, she’d see just how fucking dark I can go.

“Don’t ever think you can run, because once I’ve made my mind up, there is no escaping me.” I tug the door shut with a loud click and make my way to the elevator. It doesn’t take long for me to get to the garage and slip into the driver’s seat of my father’s Aston.

I don’t know how we’re going to stop this bullshit ritual, but I’ll die trying. I pull out my phone and hit call on Dad’s number. A few rings later, and I hear his voice come through the line.

“What did you learn?”

“They’re going to initiate her into the sanctum, into the circle.” I keep my voice low, hoping and praying that he has an answer for me. That Dad will be able to help me save her. She may think she’s merely the entertainment, but this means so much more than Rukaiya can ever imagine.

She’s my little wolf, and no one else will take her but me.

I'll make sure of it.

"They can't do that. She's not twenty-one yet, and even so, the Elders will never allow it."

"They're not doing it in London," I inform him. "They're flying to Amsterdam."

I hear the breath that leaves my father's lungs at that moment. I've heard about the European societies. Everything I've heard has made me wary of her going there, and the fact that Fergus thinks he can initiate her into a circle of filthy assholes who will then own her—that's utter bullshit.

"Okay, we'll sort this out. Get back to the mansion, and I'll get the jet ready, we'll fly out there tonight."

I hang up, start the engine and peel out of the lot and down the busy London streets. It's going to take me at least an hour to get out of the city and to my father's new home.

Enough time to plan exactly how I'm going to gut Fergus Harrison.

Walking into my father's office is like taking a step back in time. The room is rich with history, with ghosts from the past, and it holds a certain danger that seems to lurk right beneath the surface. I wish I could be anywhere but here.

Not because I'm afraid, but because this is a place I'd rather never visit. Even though I'm proud to be a Crown, I don't approve of a lot of what they do here. Dad isn't as bad as his predecessors, but power brings a hunger for more.

"What have we got?" I ask, as I settle in the chair opposite his desk. My father is someone you'd envision running a secret society. His dark hair with hazel eyes and

handsome smile make him seem like an easy-going family man. Always dressed in a suit, and if I didn't know better, I would peg him for a lawyer or some shit.

"They're meeting in two days. We'll fly out tonight, and I'm reaching out to them to attend the ritual." Confusion creases my face as I regard my father. "What?"

"Attend the ritual? We have to stop this. We can't have her out there prancing around, so every man in the fucking society can look at her!" My voice booms through the office, and I know I'm being loud, rude, and disrespectful, but the thought of my little wolf dancing around in nothing but a fucking leotard that I know will hug her slight curves and bubble butt has jealousy coursing through my veins.

"Etienne Eros Durand." His voice is cold, controlled, and he uses my full fucking name. I know I'm fucked, but I don't give a shit. "Listen to me, and you listen very fucking well." Dad pushes up from where he's sitting, his hands splayed on the smooth surface of his wooden desk. "When I say we're doing something, it's my call."

My body vibrates with frustration and anger at my father's words. I want nothing to do with this if he's not going to help me or Rukaiya. I'll do it myself.

"And if I even hear you're trying to fuck up my plan then I'll send you back home and you won't be allowed back here."

"Plan? Attending the ritual isn't a plan. You're sending her into a den of fucking lions," I bite out through clenched teeth, fisting my hands at my sides to keep from punching the goddamned wall.

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My father smirks knowingly. “Then you better pray your girl can fight back because she’s going to have to if she wants to survive this.”

“You’re not trying to help her, are you?”

“Why would you ask that? I’m not a monster, Etienne,” he tells me. “I’m here to run the Sovereign in the best way I know how.” He stalks around his desk, making his way toward me. I half expect him to hug me, but my father isn’t that type of person.

He’s about to say something more when the door swings open and the gentle fragrance of honey and apples wafts through, along with the woman I know isn’t just my father’s assistant.

“Hello, Etienne,” she smiles at me when she reaches us. “It’s lovely to finally meet you.” Her words are melodic. She is the polar opposite of my mother: delicate, pretty, and young. My mother, on the other hand, is made of Botox and plastic; she comes from old money where being seen and noticed are what you strive for. The woman before me is nothing like that.

“Yeah, I don’t doubt you’ve heard all about me when I have no clue who you are.” Shrugging, I offer a salute to my father before turning on my heel and heading to the door. “See you tonight, make sure I’m not seated beside your arm candy.” I expect him to call me back to admonish me, but he doesn’t, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

This is a fucking joke.

My father may think he’s in love, but he’s just blinded by pussy. It doesn’t come

easy, no emotions do. You work for that shit. It doesn't fall into your lap. That's why I know what I feel for Rukaiya is real, it's not some flimsy bullshit that will end the moment she gets older.

And I'll make her see it.

One way or another.

8

Rukaiya

The suite we're staying in is exquisite, and I can only imagine the cost of this. My father's been silent, brooding, and I wonder what he's thinking. It wasn't long after Etienne left that Dad returned from whatever meeting he'd had, and I wondered if he bumped into Etienne on the way in. However, his focus was on packing, getting on the flight and coming to Amsterdam.

I wanted to ask him to change his mind, to see if there's another way, but I didn't. I still recall the day my father asked me if I wanted to do ballet. My mother was still around when I was learning, and she'd always give me pointers and drive me to lessons; she always watched me with such love in her eyes.

After mom died, it was my only connection to her, so I kept dancing, up until I turned sixteen when Dad decided he'd had enough of my 'prancing around.' He forced me to focus on practical subjects, so I did, but deep down, I'd missed being on stage. I took to it easily, spinning on my toes, leaping into the air, and I loved the feeling of being free.

"You'll practice over the next two days," Dad tells me finally as I flop into the armchair. "I want this performance perfect. Dimitri is a fan of the ballet, and if you

can charm him with your talents, I can get the information out of him.”

“What information?”

“That’s not for you to worry about. This is for your benefit; one day when I’m no longer here, you’ll have everything you’ve ever dreamed of.” He watches me for a response, a retort of anger, or perhaps something else, but I don’t offer it. I don’t want him to see my frustration.

Dad pours himself a drink, neat vodka from the small bar fridge that’s perched in the corner of our suite. No ice. He just gulps it down like it’s water. There’s only a small wince on his face before he turns to me again, pinning me with a glare.

Sighing, I nod and respond, “So you’re not selling me off to some random Russian man?” I shouldn’t goad him when he’s like this, but I’m at a point of no return. I’ve always been difficult with him, and I was never apologetic about it because I knew he didn’t love me the way a parent should love his child.

“If he offered me enough, perhaps I would.”

“Can I have my phone back?” I ask him gently, hoping he’ll at least give me one freedom back. When he walked into the apartment earlier, he took my phone and kept it. I know he was checking if I’d contacted anyone, but I didn’t. He made it clear I wasn’t to contact anyone in Tynewood, and I obeyed like the good daughter I am. But now that I’m almost done with this bullshit charade that he’s planning, I want my life back.

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“If I see one call to your friend—”

“Dad, you told me not to talk to Dahlia. I won’t talk to her.” My insistence must calm him down somewhat because he pulls my phone from his suit pants and hands it to me. I quickly reach for it, but the moment my fingers make contact, he tugs it, so I’m forced to meet his penetrative stare. “I promise.”

Those two words get me my phone, and I watch my father leave the room and head into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. I’m not stupid, he’s giving me space, testing me. But I’m not failing this time.

Once, when I was a little girl, he did that to me. Leaving me alone after giving me an order. I disobeyed. My ass smarted painfully from his belt for days. He knew what I was doing before I even did it.

This time, though, I’m older, wiser, and I’m not about to get myself into trouble before I can finish this job. I need to know who this Dimitri guy is. Perhaps I can call Etienne in the morning and tell him where I am. Or maybe I can get a message to Dahlia and let her know I’m okay.

I miss her.

I hope she misses me, too.

Curling myself on the cushions, I hold onto my phone and allow my eyes to close. I’m tired, and I know I won’t get any rest in the coming days.

“Get up!” My father’s irate tone comes from somewhere in my dreams, and I’m certain I’m about to be pummeled. Instead, my arm is tugged, and my body stumbles from the chair. My neck is pained as I’m brought to my feet abruptly, and when my eyes snap open, I’m met with my father’s glower.

“What’s—”

“We need to leave.” He’s adamant, but confusion clouds my mind, and the sleep that I was happily lost to is slowly clearing. “Get your shit,” he orders me in a commanding tone, pointing at the small backpack and my suitcase.

I’m still unsure of what’s happening when I’m dragged from the hotel suite, down the hallway and shoved into the elevator. Dad doesn’t say anything on the ride down to the garage, but the tension radiating off him is intense, sending awareness through me.

When he’s in this kind of mood, I know better than to speak. It’s early morning, and even though the sun hasn’t risen yet, the sky is taking on a soft pinkish-purple glow that lights up the horizon.

Once we’re in the car, the engine roars to life, and soon enough, dad is speeding through the narrowed streets of Amsterdam. I’m about to break the silence when I notice we’re headed away from the city and toward the airstrip where we landed only a few hours ago.

“Dad, what’s going on?”

“That little boyfriend of yours has fucked with my plans for the last time. Thankfully, Abner is still able to look out for us.”

My heart skyrockets at the mention of Etienne. He’s the only person I know who

could have my father in such a state. “What do you mean?” Twisting in my seat, I pin my father with an inquisitive stare.

“Nothing you should worry about,” Dad responds, and I wonder just what the hell has happened. I know he won’t give me answers, but once we’re on the plane, maybe I’ll be able to get his phone. Whenever we fly, he plugs it into a charger in the bedroom while he works.

It doesn’t take long to reach the private airstrip, and Dad is out of the car, carrying our luggage before I have time to think this through. If I can get a second alone before we take off, I’ll be able to message Etienne. Or Dahlia. But the moment we board, I’m watched like a hawk. He doesn’t leave me to my own devices until we’re airborne, and there’s no WiFi signal anywhere on the flight.

“You can sleep, I’ll be working until we land,” Dad says.

I glance toward him, attempting to hide my smile because I know his phone is in the bedroom. I can shut the door and quickly get into the device. I won’t be able to see his emails, those are encrypted, but I know the messages will give me a hint as to what’s going on.

“Where are we going?”

He looks up from his laptop where he’s been typing furiously for the past ten minutes and gives me a dark smile.

“Tynewood, I thought you might want to see your friends again,” he tells me, but there’s nothing genuine about his words or his smile. No. Everything about him is sinister, and I’m afraid that something bad is about to happen.

Something very fucking bad.

Etienne

The moment we cross the threshold, I seek her out. I don't see Fergus, and my body is tense with fear that he's done something to her. Eyes land on me and Dad as we make our way into the large, dimly lit room. It's an old building, warehouse-style, with nothing but a long conference table and about twenty chairs surrounding it.

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“Ah, we have visitors,” Heinrich, the man who runs the meeting rises and stalks toward us. He’s draped in a dark robe, the hood covering his head, but his deep blue eyes shimmer with amusement as he reaches for Isaac, and they shake hands. I didn’t realize my father was friends with this asshole, but it seems I don’t know much about him.

“We’re looking for your newest contact,” Dad tells the man who’s regarding me with an inquisitive stare. “He’s done a few things that are rather... uncalled for.” I want to rectify that statement with the truth, but I don’t. Instead, I wait for Heinrich’s response.

“Mmmm,” he turns away, looking at the men around the table as if he’s waiting for one of them to object. Heinrich chuckles as he turns toward us once more. “There are far too many rumors flying around that your friend, Fergus Harrison, is attempting to overthrow one of the societies.”

My father steps forward, his brow creased in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Heinrich sighs. “He’s playing both sides of the fence. Even though he’s one of Lancaster’s soldiers, there’s another man who we’ve found him meeting with—Thane Calvert. The partnership soured when Abner was arrested, and they found names in a logbook he’d kept hidden.”

“But that doesn’t mean Fergus was involved.”

“On the contrary.” Heinrich rounds the table, shuffling pages on the desk. After he grabs the one he wants, he nears Dad once more. Handing it over, he gestures toward

the photo. “This shows Fergus and Calvert meeting two days ago. I was promised Harrison would be here tonight with his daughter, but they didn’t show.”

“Where are they?” It’s my turn to step forward. My muscles ache with tension and frustration as the man with the bright blue eyes glares my way.

“You’re the son?”

“Yes, this is my son, Etienne,” my dad introduces me with a pat on the back. “He’s taken over as a Crown in Tynewood.” The introduction makes my chest tighten; he sounds so proud of me, and I wonder if I ever chose to not become a Crown would he still love me.

“Well, it is good to meet you, younger Durand.” Heinrich grins, offering me his hand, which I accept and give it a shake before he continues explaining, “Fergus has taken one of the private jets, and he’s on his way back Stateside.”

“That makes no sense,” Dad responds.

“We kept an eye on them, and unfortunately, we cannot stop him as Abner has put the order out to have him returned unharmed.” The men around the table murmur an agreement at Heinrich’s response.

“And he’s just escaped after all he’s done?” I can’t keep my mouth shut as frustration ebbs and flows through me. I know I’ll have to wait a few hours before I can get on a flight, but perhaps if I can get Tar and Ares on it, they’ll find the asshole before he can meet with Abner Lancaster. I know for a fact Ares will not let his father near Rukaiya.

“We cannot do much. The rules still come from Tynewood.”

“But Abner is no longer a fucking Crown!” My voice is high, peaked with the rage that’s been fueling me since I learned Rukaiya was taken out of Tynewood. I’m tense with emotion, and I can feel my father staring at me from beside me. “He has no say in this society anymore. The Sovereign no longer acknowledge him as a member, much less a Crown.”

“That may be true in Tynewood, but here,” the older man waves his hand over the table. His almost white hair luminous under the flickering flames of the torches that surround us. His pale skin glowing as he stares my way once more. “We still see all those fallen and those risen up as part of the faction.”

“You may see him as a Crown, but he doesn’t hold any power over who does what,” Isaac informs Heinrich. “As one of the last remaining Elders, I need you to offer us all the information you have on Fergus.”

Heinrich regards Dad for a long while, and I’m sure he’s about to deny him, but the man nods silently and makes his way back to the head of the table. We wait in silence as he opens the folder, and I watch him leaf through the pages on the wooden top.

I’m not sure what Heinrich can give us that we don’t already know, but I allow my father to take the lead. My body is tight, coiled like a sleeping serpent, ready to attack. I want to find my little wolf and keep her safe.

She’s pushed me away numerous times. But I’ve never backed away from a challenge. Whether she likes it or not, I’ll fucking kill for her. Never once have I wanted someone the way I do her. She tests me emotionally, and she taunts me physically, more than any girl who’s ever crossed my path, but I know she’ll give in soon. I’ll wear her down until she’s beside me, as a Crown herself.

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Since Ares and Philipe agreed to crown Dahlia, I'll plead my case that Rukaiya is special. She can offer so much to the society; the Sovereign needs her, and I'll make sure she becomes one of us.

Even though it seems as if I'm being selfless, it's a lie. I'm selfish right down to my core because if she's crowned, she can't leave, and that means she'll be in my life forever.

I'm never going to let her leave.

"This is all I have," Heinrich finally speaks, dragging me back to the present and the ominous room we're standing in. He hands Dad a folder, thick with documents full of information we will need to take Fergus down. I wonder just what secrets are hidden within those inked pages.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Heinrich," Dad tells the man, and I watch as they, once again, shake hands.

The white-haired man turns to me, regarding me with a smirk. "You're a good boy, strong, stubborn, and volatile, but be careful of that fire, Etienne," he tells me. "Sometimes, the fire can cause more destruction than anything else." His ominous words send ice racing through my veins.

"I'm only here to save her," I inform him with a conviction that I feel right down to my core. "Anything else is just a bonus."

He chuckles, nodding, before he offers me his hand once more. Once we say our

goodbyes, I follow Dad out to the town car that's waiting at the sidewalk. The moment we're seated, Isaac informs our driver to take us directly to the airstrip and then he's on the phone organizing our flight out of Europe and back to Tynewood.

Thankfully, I'll be back home soon and then I'll be able to put an end to this bullshit that Fergus has planned. I pull out my mobile phone and tap out a message to Ares and Tarian informing them of my return.

"This girl," Dad starts. "She may not want you to save her. Perhaps she's working for her father." His tone is cold, indifferent, and I realize he doesn't approve of my feelings for her. But you can't help who you want, he of all people should know that.

"I didn't ask for your approval. And if there's one thing I'm sure of, Rukaiya is innocent in all this. She doesn't deserve the shit her father is putting her through." This time, I meet my father's gaze dead on. "She's mine. I've set my mind on it, and I'm not allowing anyone to get in the way."

He watches me for a moment before he nods. "Fine. But just be careful, Etienne. I allowed my heart to lead me into a love so volatile that I had to walk away to save myself."

"No, Dad, you didn't save yourself, you left me to fend for myself. You wanted to play house with a woman half your age, that's all you ever wanted. Mom may have had her problems, but so did you."

"I don't deny that, Etienne. But—"

"No, you walked out, Dad. There is no excuse for you leaving." I don't know why I'm angry with my father, but I need to burn off this frustration soon. I'm riled up, and I can't shake the rage fueling me right now. "You left without a backward glance, expecting me to leave the Sovereign and my friends because you didn't agree with

me becoming a Crown.”

He nods, knowing I’m right. I recall the speech he gave, telling me that once I’m finished with my studies, he wants me out of Tynewood. Only, he wasn’t there to stop me from taking the pledge and getting inked. The tattoo on my chest is the one thing that offered me a family that I never had.

“I couldn’t stop you, even if I was still living at home with your mother. Everyone has a path he needs to follow, son,” Dad tells me, there’s honesty in his tone that grips my chest painfully. “And you were always meant to be a Crown, I just wasn’t happy about it. But I know I could never stop it from happening, no matter where in the world I was.”

“So, you leaving was because you wanted a faction for yourself or because mom was a bitch?”

He chuckles at my question, shaking his head as he glances before us, and I take note that we’re pulling into the airstrip. There’s a plane waiting on the tarmac, and the muscles in my shoulders only tighten further with the realization that in a few hours we’ll be face-to-face with Fergus.

“I left because I couldn’t love your mother the way she needed,” Dad admits, causing me to snap my gaze back to him. “And you needed something more than what I could offer. Even though she wasn’t perfect, I knew she could love you. My focus was on the Sovereign, and I know that makes me a bad father...” His words trickle into nothing, and I want to tell him that he’s wrong, that I do love him, and I know he loves me, but I don’t. I allow him to wallow in the belief that he owes me.

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“Let’s go.” I push the door open and step out of the car before any more truths can be admitted. It’s time to go home and find my girl.

10

Rukaiya

When we land back in Tynewood, I pray that we see Ares, Tarian, and Dahlia. But there’s no such luck because it’s not long before we reach a motel, sitting on the outskirts of town, without being spotted. Dad shoves the door open, and soon, I’m inside the musty-smelling bedroom with my father glaring at me.

“You’re here for one thing only, to meet with Abner’s contacts, show them your dancing skills, and then we’re leaving again,” he tells me. “If you try contacting your friends, they won’t be alive to see their next birthday.”

“When did you become such a monster?” I don’t know where my courage comes from, and I’m certainly not feeling it as my body shakes when he nears me.

He stands inches from me, glaring down at me with a sneer curling his lips. Dad grips my chin between his thumb and forefinger, pinching the flesh until I wince in pain. “You need to learn to respect your elders. Your mother was just the same, fucking snarky and disrespectful,” he bites out, forcing tears to fill my eyes. I pray with all I have that he drops dead.

“You killed her.”

“She was weak. She couldn’t handle the husband she claimed to love, so she didn’t deserve to live. Your mother was a fucking useless waste of space.” He chuckles before continuing, “The only good thing I got out of that marriage was you, a pretty little bargaining chip.”

“What do you mean?” I question as he releases me from his grip. “Dad, what have you done?”

A small, evil smile turns his mouth into an upward curve, and I realize he’s done something bad, something sinister. He doesn’t respond, merely shakes his head before he turns away from me and I’m left staring at his back.

He’s taken my phone again. I don’t have any way of contacting Dahlia; I need to make a plan. Perhaps once he’s asleep, I can get to her. I can walk; we’re not far from Tynewood. It might take me an hour or more to get there, but I have no other choice.

I’m alone in the room. Fergus is in the bathroom with the door shut, but when I look around, I take note that he hasn’t left anything around for me to use as either a weapon or a way of contacting my friends.

I wonder if they’re still my friends after I ran. I didn’t tell anyone where I was going or why. My chest aches when I think about what they must have concluded. After Etienne’s convincing words, though, I feel like perhaps they’ll forgive me. Maybe even save me from this shitshow my father has gotten me into.

The water sounds from the other side of the door. As I settle on the mattress, I wonder if I got out of this room, would I be able to get far enough to be safe from him. But I know my father, I’ve lived with him all my life. He rules with an iron fist, and he seems to know what I’m planning before I’ve even attempted it.

He did it with mom, and he’s done it with me numerous times when I was growing

up. It was that darkness he exuded that instilled fear in both me and my mother. And we tried to never upset him in the event that he would lose his cool.

“Where’s Daddy?” Momma looks so scared like she’s going to cry, but I don’t understand why. The TV is loud, the cartoon Daddy put on the screen is screaming loudly at me. He told me I needed to be a good girl and watch it until he got back.

I don’t like making him angry, so I don’t move, instead of answering, I shrug my shoulders at mom, knowing it will annoy her. She hates when I do that, but sometimes, I just want to be good. I hate when Daddy shouts at me.

“Look at me, Ruki,” Momma calls to me, it’s her voice that makes me turn again, and I find a tear running down her cheek. It’s only then do I see the big suitcase behind her. “You need to get up and come with me.” She’s still broken from her accident. Her arm is in a white bandage, Daddy called it a sling. It’s a weird word to call something.

“But...” Even when I speak, my voice sounds soft, like I’m scared, and I hate being scared. She knows that Daddy will be angry if we don’t do as he says. “Daddy is coming home, and he wants me to sit here.”

Momma’s eyes shine with tears. She’s sad, and I don’t know why. She smiles then, a small one, but it’s a smile. Then she kneels on the floor in front of me. The cold tiles must hurt her knees because she winces. Her hands land on my thighs, she holds me still, looking directly at me, and suddenly, I feel nervous. It’s as if there’s something she wants to say, but she’s too afraid.

I'm scared, too.

My chest hurts, and I can't breathe, but I don't look at the TV, I look at my pretty momma. She's got long dark hair, with green eyes that look like glass when the light shines on it, shimmering.

"I need you to trust me, Ruki," she tells me earnestly.

I know something's wrong. Momma has never been so serious before, not when we're alone. Yes, when Daddy is in the house, I know my momma stays quiet in the bedroom, but when we're here without him, she'll laugh and make jokes.

This time, though, there aren't any laughs.

"But Momma, I'm scared."

"I know, my sweet girl." She smiles again and strokes my hair. I have hair like my daddy's family: white blonde. It's so light, sometimes I wonder how my momma had me. Her skin is darker than Daddy's, and I'm a little bit in between that. I don't look much like my father, but the blonde hair has always made me stand out from the crowd.

"Momma, where are you going?"

She glances over her shoulder, taking in the suitcase that sits there, waiting. Will she finally run away? Will she leave me here alone?

“We’re going on holiday,” she tells me then, looking back at me as she pulls me into her arms. I’m small for my age. Most of the teachers think I’m younger than I really am. And they all think I’m just a child. I may be young, but I know things happen in adults’ lives that they don’t want us to know.

I know my father isn’t a good man.

I know my mother should leave and take me with her.

But the moment she rises and tugs me from the sofa, the door flings open, slamming itself against the wall. My father saunters inside, and his glare is nothing short of evil like the bad men in cartoons.

“What’s going on here?” He glances between me and momma, and I wonder if he’s going to hurt us both. Or will he finally see he’s bad? “Care to tell me?”

“Fergus,” Momma pleads as she releases my hand, shoving me behind her as she straightens her spine. But it’s no use, because she can’t fight him. He’s taller, bigger, and stronger. “Please, let us just go to my mother’s house.”

“You’re not taking my fucking daughter anywhere.” There’s rage in my dad’s voice. Something violent that slaps my face with merely his words, and I can’t help but settle my butt on the cushions. It’s easier if I just sit quietly. He won’t notice me, and he’ll only talk to momma.

“Listen to me. Your focus is on the Sov—”

“Speak one more fucking word and I’ll end you.” I know he’s not lying. His hands are fisted beside him, and I wonder if tonight he’ll make momma’s face blue and purple again.

“I’m sorry, Fergus, please, just let me go,” Momma asks, and I almost want to cry out and beg her not to leave me, but the loud echo of dad’s hand against momma’s face is his response. She’s not going anywhere. Ever.

Dad walks into the bedroom wearing a dark suit breaking me from the memory that’s caused tears to sting my eyes. He looks at me for a moment before throwing his phone on the bed.

“Time to get going. Shower, change, and let’s go. I want to be out of here in the next ten minutes.” His voice doesn’t give anything away. I’m unsure of how he’s feeling or what he’s thinking, and that scares me more than anything. When he’s like this—silent, almost deadly—I fear, not only for my life, but for those I care about.

“Where are we going?”

“No questions, just obey.” He pulls out a cigar and settles in the chair, waving me along to get going. I’m unsure of what’s about to happen, but I have a feeling that I’m about to meet the men my father has been working for all this time.

Abner Lancaster may be behind bars, but he’s not alone in all this. And my father is clearly one of his most trusted soldiers. The only question is, once a soldier has performed his duty—what’s left for him after?

Silently, I make my way to the bathroom, and inside, I find my outfit. The leotard that hugs every inch of my torso. A deep blue silk skirt that I know will only just barely cover my ass, and the shoes that I once loved wearing. Now those ballet shoes are my downfall because, against my will, I’m meant to be the entertainment.

If you want to save me, Etienne, now is the time to do it.

Rukaiya

Dad is sitting beside me in the car that was rented for us by the men who he's been working for. I don't know who they are just yet, but soon enough, I'll be surrounded by them.

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When I finished getting ready, he told me to get in the car while he filled the trunk with our suitcases and what I can only assume was a duffel bag with guns or other weapons.

It isn't the first time he's brought things like that into a home where I was. My mother would always have a go at him for doing it, but he never cared. I wish I had escaped long ago. I was too scared to tell Dahlia's dad about it, and that was a mistake.

Fear keeps us prisoner in the one place we need to escape. And now I'm about to perform for people I've never met, for strangers who have paid to watch me. Like an exotic dancer stepping up on stage, I'm meant to behave until my father tells me otherwise.

The drive is silent, and I'm tempted once more to ask him not to do this. I want to beg him to be a good man, someone who loves me, but it's no longer my father beside me. No, this man is a stranger, an evil man who will do anything for the Sovereign that Abner created.

Even though he's been a part of the society, he's never been crowned, and that's the ultimate goal for the men who are inked into the society. I learned that when I saw how Etienne, Tarian and Ares fought for their place in the society before I was stolen from Tynewood.

And knowing that Dahlia is one of them makes me sad. We were best friends, like sisters, and now as Dad weaves through the darkened streets, I feel more alone than I ever have before. When we pull onto a small side street that leads up to a small hill

about an hour outside of Tynewood, my nerves take hold of me, twisting my stomach into anxious knots.

I don't recognize this place, and I don't know who lives here, but the house we're nearing after we enter through humongous steel gates tells me it's someone with too much money. Three floors of illuminated windows greet us as we come to a stop outside the mansion; there's a large fountain that sits just outside the front door, and it's lit up with blue strobe lights.

I can't see much of the garden, but what I can make out, it's massive. Wealth drips from every inch of the property, and when I exit the vehicle, a man in a black tux, white button-up, and black tie makes his way toward us.

Dad's hand urges me forward, and the stranger before me grins. His eyes are dark, and his skin porcelain in the low lighting.

"Good evening," he greets us both. "The party has already started. I'm so happy to see the entertainment has arrived." His hungry gaze trails over me, causing me to shudder with revulsion. Even though he's not bad to look at, there's nothing but pure animalistic lust in his gaze.

"She just needs somewhere to change," Dad tells him, and the stranger nods, gesturing for us to follow him into the cavernous house. Marble tiles brighten the entranceway; we head down a long, narrow hallway, which leads deeper into the home.

When we reach a dark wooden door, the man before us shoves it open and steps aside. "You can change in here. I'll wait until you're done," he tells me then looks to my father. "Mr. Wilder is waiting for you."

Dad nods, offering me a small smile, before he leaves me with the stranger. "What's

your name?" I ask once we're alone.

"You don't need to know that," he responds. "All you need to do is look pretty, dance for them, and wait for your father once he's finished with his meeting. Other than that, you're merely a pawn in a game for adults."

"I'm not some fucking toy you can shove around," I bite out, crossing my arms in front of my chest. He steps closer to me, causing me to stumble backward, my body hitting the doorjamb eliciting a wince from me.

"Listen to me and listen good," the man sneers. "Women are nothing more than entertainment for the Sovereign. You think because you have friends in Tynewood that you're not going to be used as a bargaining chip?" he chuckles evilly, turning my stomach upside down with fear and revulsion. "You're nothing in this house. The man you're about to meet is worse than Abner Lancaster. So if you think for one second that you can walk in here and act like a sassy little bitch, you have another thing coming."

I don't know what possesses me in that moment, but my hand flies up and makes contact with his smooth, white cheek. The sound reverberates through the space, and seconds later, there's a hand wrapped around my neck.

"You think I won't end you, bitch?" There's a darkness in his eyes that tells me this man has killed before. He's done things that would haunt my worst nightmares. I can't move. Even if I could, I know there's no getting out of this safely, so I stand there, waiting for him to release me.

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His fingers tighten, stealing the breath from my lungs. He's shrouded in shadows as they dance across his evil, yet handsome face, and I wonder just how someone could fall so deep into the depths of depravity.

"This place is not for pretty little girls who want to be heroes." There's a warning in his voice, and I move my head slightly in a nod to hopefully appease him. He releases me then, allowing me to pull in deep breaths, before he gestures once more with his hand for me to enter the bedroom.

The door shuts behind me, and I take in my surroundings. It's beautiful, the large double bed is ornate with four posts that are carved in beautiful patterns. A dark carpet adorns the floor with a soft feel to my now bare feet as I slip off the sandals I'm wearing.

There's floor-to-ceiling cupboards that have mirrors in the doors, which reflect the opposite curtains that have been drawn shut. I'm sure the view is of the vast gardens behind the house, but I don't linger.

Setting my small rucksack on the mattress, I open it and pull out the blue skirt. I slip off my sweatpants, stepping out of them, before I tug the skirt up my thighs and fasten the small button at my waist. The hemline hits me mid-thigh, and the silky material is flowy around my legs.

Settling myself on the seat at the vanity, I stare at my reflection, taking in my hair that's been braided for almost five years now. I love each and every one of my beaded plaits, and as I twist them and pin them into a bun at the back of my head, I wonder if I could ever cut them off. Perhaps becoming someone new would change

who I am right now.

A tear trickles down my cheek as I stare at myself. A girl no longer innocent, no longer unaware of the danger her father has led her into. I wish I was free from under his thumb. I want so much to run, but I know he'll find me.

I can't let him hurt anyone else in my life, least of all Etienne. Something about that man has changed something inside me. My chest aches for him; I want to hear his voice once more, to look into those endless deep pools of affection and tell him I want him.

For a long time, I believed that pushing everyone away would keep them safe. Even now, I know it's true. But my heart wants one more glimpse of the boy, the man, who's captured my attention more so than anyone before.

All through school, I never once had a boyfriend who I truly cared for. Each one of them was merely a distraction, someone to take me away from home where there was always an innate fear that danger would come knocking.

I hated my father all my life, and being away from him was my only reprieve, so I would go out, I would party and get drunk, even before I should've been. At nineteen, I have nothing but a hope that this will finally offer me freedom.

Tears brim my lashes as I slip my left foot into my pointe shoe. Gently, I twine the ribbon, and I feel the ache in my chest as the heartbreak attacks me with a vengeance. Blinking away the emotion, I pull on the other shoe and twist the ribbon.

Once my pointes are on, I rise from the seat and turn to find the doorknob twisting, and soon enough, it swings open, and I'm met with the stranger who didn't want to give me his name. He looks me over once, twice, then grins.

“Rather fetching,” he tells me as he steps aside, and I exit the darkened bedroom. The hallway is lit with yellow lamps that offer shadows amongst the glow as the man follows behind me. He steers me left, right, then straight ahead, and before we reach the staircase that leads down into a dimly lit entrance way, I can hear the music filtering up to where we’re standing.

“How many are there?”

When he stops beside me, his dark eyes land on me before he lifts his chin toward the door. “Far too many to count. And tonight, all eyes will be on you.” The man reaches for the doorknob, but my hand shoots out to grasp his arm.

“What’s your name?”

“Thanatos, but everyone calls me Thane,” he grins.

“What does it mean?” I don’t know why I need to know all this before I walk in there, but I do. There’s a hint of humor in his expression, and I wonder just what could be so funny.

“Death,” he tells me. That one word sends a cold shiver over me. “I trust that will be the end of your questioning... that is until your mother arrives.”

“What?”

He doesn't respond, merely pulls open the door and shoves me inside.

The moment I step foot inside the dimly lit room, I feel the tension tighten my shoulders. I want to run, to turn around and leave, but if I do, I won't learn what Thane meant about my mother. I know she's dead; I found her bleeding out in the bathtub.

But what if it's all a lie?

The circle of black cloaks greets me when I enter the main area of the basement. Even though it's not very well lit, I can make out a sea of black cloth all the way into the darkness of the space.

In the center of the circle is an enormous crucifix that hangs from the ceiling, and I notice there are pews all pushed against the walls. On my left is a high stained-glass window, with the full moon shining through, causing the picture of a shepherd to shimmer at me.

I'm not religious in any way, but there's a darkness that settles in my gut from the thought of what I'm about to experience. My father sold me out. I'm merely a pawn to him.

The moment I am in the middle of the circle where the spotlight from above shines down, I stop, my eyes taking in each cloaked figure. I can't see their faces, but I can feel their leering gazes linger on various parts of me. These are the men my father left

me with. I'm meant to entertain them—dance, smile, flirt—while my father gets some sort of information, but something tells me that they have something else in mind.

“The little princess of Fergus Harrison,” one of the men speaks in a low timber. I don't recognize his voice, and a cold shiver takes hold of my body, gripping it in a feral hold that steals my breath.

Silence hangs heavily before speakers come alive around the room, and a piano concerto starts. The melody surrounds me from every corner, and I'm suddenly dumbfounded as to what to do.

“Dance for us,” an order comes from behind me, forcing me to whirl around, but I can't tell where the words came from.

Closing my eyes, I focus on the music and allow my feet to move. It's easy to listen to that instead of focusing on the men who watch me. My hands lift into the air as my body pirouettes in circles. I'm light, floating from left to right, but my heart is heavy with all that's happening.

With every note of the piano, I move and spin, I prance and jump, and I don't listen to the heavy breathing that seems almost louder than the speakers can handle. A tear escapes me, and I allow it to trickle down my cheek.

Will they see me cry?

Perhaps, but right now, I don't care because all that matters is my escape and finding out what Thane meant about my mother. If she's alive, then I'll find her. And when I do, I'll kill my father for what he's put us both through.

I'm not alone.

I'm never alone.

Because the moment the music stops, so do I.

My eyes snap open to find a familiar stare pinned on me.

I meet the gaze of Etienne Durand.

12

Etienne

“Man, you didn’t tell us about her dancing,” Tarian smirks as he whispers in my ear, causing me to snap my glare on him. “Bet she looks good bent over at the waist.” When he waggles his eyebrows, I’m tempted to punch him in the face, but instead, I go for his shoulder where I know he just got his ink touched up yesterday. “Fuck, man,” he hisses in pain.

“Don’t talk about her like that, or I’ll fuck you up,” I warn him in a low tone, as to not capture the attention of everyone around us while he grips his shoulder, much to Ares’s amusement.

“You two need to relax.” Our best friend whispers to us, but I’m far from fucking relaxed. All I need is for us to find the asshole and kill him before I steal my girl from this shitshow.

Her dancing is beautiful, elegant, and intoxicating. I turn my attention back to her, and I realize she’s still watching me intently. The beauty that’s captured not only my attention, but my heart, is looking straight at me. With a slight shake of my head, I tug the hood further over my head to cover my face.

She stands perfectly poised, ready to entertain the room. But all I can think about is seeing her in nothing but those damn shoes. Thankfully, the long cloak I'm wearing hides my prominent erection because after that dance, my blood is hot, my body needy, and I'm dying to steal her away from here.

But we have work to do. Firstly, we need to keep the faction happy, and with that, it means she needs to do what her father brought her here to do. We've never come to any of the meetings they've held here in Mill River, but now that I see how big their faction is, I know we may have a problem on our hands.

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I overheard some of the men talking earlier. Apparently, their leader is an asshole worse than Abner, and that's saying something. Ares's father was pure evil, so this asshole must be the fucking Devil incarnate.

"More," one of the old cronies' commands and waves his hand before the piano starts up once more, and we're met with another haunting melody. She moves gracefully, and I'm enraptured by her beauty. Each spin of her frame, every twist and leap make my dick harder, and I wonder just how much more I can take without strolling up to the center of the circle and claiming her as mine. But I know her father is somewhere in here watching.

He can't know we're here until we can get our hands on him. The moment Ares and Tarian have him subdued, I'll move in. Dahlia is waiting at home, and I know she's anxious to see her best friend again.

Once the music stops, one of the Crowns rises and stalks toward her, and it takes everything in me to restrain myself from racing to the front and grabbing her. But he doesn't touch her when he reaches my little wolf. Instead, he stops, stares at her for a long moment, and utters six words that still my breathing.

"You look just like your mother."

"What?" Her voice is a choked murmur and the shock painted on her pretty face is clear as day. Her mother is dead, so his comment is strange, and comes out of left field.

"That's enough of this charade." The man who I haven't seen in more than ten years

saunters into the space. The crown on his head tells me that he's the leader of the faction. I glance at Tarian who's glare is burning a hole through his uncle, but he doesn't move, and I know there's only violence racing through him in this moment. I cut my eyes back to the center of the circle to find Fergus trailing behind Tarian's uncle, Thanatos Calvert, or better known as Thane.

When he walked out of Tynewood, we thought he was far away. He wasn't much older than we are now when he was named as guardian to his nephew, but he wasn't ready for parenthood and left Tarian to fend for himself.

Thane, as we all knew him, is in his mid-thirties, and I know, for a fact, he was in Europe for a long while after he moved out of the Calvert mansion. But now that he's one town over, it has me wondering what his reasons are for returning to America.

Fergus doesn't look at his daughter, his eyes scan the crowd, and I have to lower my hood once more. The tension coming from my left is palpable as my best friend watches his uncle grip Rukaiya's arm and tug her closer to his tall frame.

"I trust you all enjoyed the entertainment tonight," he says.

"Tonight, we celebrate a new member to the society, the person who stood by Abner throughout the drama brought upon the Sovereign. Our fearless leader may not be around anymore, but we are here. And we will ensure his vision will come to pass. We know, as a brotherhood, that we need to be there for each other. And the moment we start pulling away from the society, Crowns will fall."

There's a murmur of agreement around the room, but I say nothing. There's a heaviness in the room, and I wonder just what this shitshow is meant to be for. Fergus steps forward, his hands bound behind his back, and that's when I see the blade glinting in the low lights of the torches that surround us.

“Tonight, a Crown has stepped up. He’s given us his sacrifice for what’s to come. The rest of the Sovereign will fall, and we will take the helm. With Abner behind bars, nothing can stop us from taking all we want and need from this world.”

There’s a cheer from everyone. They’re here to kill Fergus. But that doesn’t make sense. Why would they kill one of their own? He’s been the right-hand man to Abner for years, and even after Ares’s mother was killed, he was still there, doing the bidding of the monster we put behind bars.

Nothing makes sense. Rukaiya’s eyes meet mine in the shadows, her cheeks are stained with tears. She’s been crying since she started dancing, and even though I shouldn’t think it, I can’t help but notice how alluring she is with those shimmering cheeks.

I want nothing more than to hold her, to taste her sadness and fill her with mine. We’re both so broken and tormented from our pasts, I wonder if we could ever be something more than two shards of glass piercing each other with every move we make.

Another man enters the room, and I watch as he steals my girl from Thane. They move through the back door and Ares’s hand on my shoulder offers a squeeze, giving me the go-ahead. I don’t wait. Silently, I move through the cloaked bodies and follow the hallway we entered from. I’m not sure what the layout of this place is, but in the candlelit hallway, I make my way deeper into the house. Even though I’m a floor below ground, I can tell where the front of the house is.

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My phone vibrates wildly in my pocket, but I ignore it and race to the stairs we came from earlier. When I reach the main floor of the house, I find it deserted. I should leave, get to the garage, but the faint sound of music drags me back to the living room. That's when I see it, a woman perched on the stool at a piano. Her fingers dance along the keys, and I'm entranced by her.

Long dark hair catches my attention, and when she stops playing, she turns to look at me, and my breath is knocked from my lungs. A ghost sits before me, and I don't know what to say to her.

She smiles, and I'm sure I'm hallucinating. I must be. She's dead. She has to be. Our secret died with her. I watch her rise and turn fully to face me. Before me are the blue eyes of my best friend, and they're owned by the woman I lost my virginity to. The same woman who taught me just how volatile love can be.

"Mrs. Calvert?" my voice cracks on the words. I want to move to her, but a crash from somewhere in the house catches my attention.

"Go to her," she tells me, and I don't have to ask who because she clearly knows who I'm here for. My feet move swiftly on the marble tiles as I make my way into the depths to find an office that belongs to Tarian's uncle, at least that's my guess.

"Etienne," Rukiaya cries out, calling to me, but the moment I step foot into the darkened room, pain resonates through my skull and everything goes black.

Etienne

Darkness.

Pain.

Rage.

My eyes flicker open, then shut again a second later. I want to open them, force them to stay that way, but weariness takes over, and I can't fight it. There is shuffling around me, soft whispers, too, but I can't open my mouth. The last thing I remember is seeing Tarian's mother. She's alive, which makes no sense.

My mind dances with images that flicker in and out. I remember my little wolf call to me, walking into the dark room, and then the pain inched in and blackness descended. I'm not sure where I am, the fragrances that hit my nostrils could put me anywhere.

There aren't any other sounds, so I'm not at a hospital. Perhaps Ares and Tarian got me out, and we're at the Lancaster mansion. I fucking hope that's where I am because I cannot be with Thane and his sister-in-law. Tarian's mother is alive. How? I have no idea because she died when he was a barely seventeen. But then again, I was the one she seduced.

I remember the moment I first met her; I wasn't into girls at the time. And sex wasn't even on my radar. Sixteen and only been kissed. Isn't that a song? No. Fuck. My mind is playing tricks on me. She cannot be alive.

Yasmine Calvert. A beauty beyond all comprehension. She was a beauty queen back in the day. Long black hair, ice-blue eyes, just like her son. Her tanned skin was smooth and blemish free. A perfect, poised doll that dripped wealth and pedigree to the extent that I wondered what she was doing with her husband. The asshole was

nothing short of a pervert.

But that was my best friend's father. And I had sex with his mother. He can never know. If Tarian found out what I did, even though his mother was the one who initiated it, I doubt he'd ever forgive me. Not because I did it, but because I never confessed.

Another shuffle alerts me that someone's moving around me. I try to speak, but all that comes out is a croak.

"You're awake," Ares's voice comes from my left. "Thought we'd lost you for a bit there, man." He pushes something over me, a blanket I guess since I'm now drenched in warmth. "I'm here when you're able to speak. Dahlia's gone to get you some water." His words are soft, as if he's miles away, but I know he's right beside me.

I don't move, not that I can. I want to tell him I saw her, but I'm not sure how he'd react. Being second in command, he would have to tell Tarian, and that is something I'm not sure Tarian is ready for. At least, something I'm not ready for. The fear of Tar knowing about my past with Yasmine has always held me back from confessing.

Ares knew, he found out by accident. When he came over to my house one day after school, he found me with my slacks around my ankles and ruby red lips wrapped around my dick. I was so proud, but I was also scared shitless that I would get into trouble.

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I made him promise that he'd never utter a word of what he saw. He didn't. His vow has stayed strong since that day until now. It was the last time I saw Yasmine, and then only a week later, there was an accident, and Tarian's world was tipped on its axis.

Nothing we did could heal him, so we waited. We got drunk with him every weekend, and I only drowned my sorrows because I thought I'd lost the one woman I loved. She told me everything about her relationship. I learned things that her son probably didn't know.

And all this time, secrets were kept. Years of truths hidden away because we're all afraid we'll hurt those we love. And that's the problem with keeping things inside, they tend to fester until there's nothing good inside you anymore.

"So," Ares speaks again. "Open your mouth." I do as he says and feel the straw on my lips. I suck on it too quickly, choking on the icy liquid that trickles down my throat. Everything hurts. My chest burns, and I wonder what they did to me, how long it took for my friends to find me before they escaped with Rukaiya.

It feels as if every time I get close enough, she slips through my fingers. I want to find her. I need to find her. She doesn't know it yet, but she's mine.

"I saw her," Ares tells me in a hushed whisper. "Tarian's mother is alive."

"W-wh-what?"

"Don't play coy with me, Etienne. You saw her, too. Didn't you?" His voice is

accusing, and I want to hide. I want to deny it, but I could never lie to my brothers. Keeping something from them, yes, I can do that. Case in point. But lying is something completely different.

My eyes finally open, and my vision is slightly blurry as I take in Ares and his glower. He doesn't look happy, but I didn't think he would be.

"Y-y-yes."

He watches me for a moment before he sighs. "This isn't good. Tarian's going to find out, and it's best he finds out from you rather than that lying bitch." The anger in his tone is warranted. What she did was wrong, but it doesn't stop the agony in my chest from my stupidity of falling for it. I should've known better. Hell, I should've been more mature in realizing that I was nothing more than a distraction.

Also, I should've realized it was illegal. To be honest, I knew it was, and that's probably why I didn't say anything. She didn't make me do anything I didn't want to do. But I should've known better.

"Listen to me," Ares says, holding the glass, so I can take another sip of water. The cool liquid eases the burning in my throat, and I lie back, watching my best friend. "There are a lot of things I know Tarian will forgive, but this..." he allows his words to filter into nothing, and I nod. He's right.

"Ares," I manage to get out. "I will tell him, I just... I can't do it right now. My minds all fucked up. Seeing her, it's weird. You know?"

"What about Rukaiya?" Ares questions, and I can't help but feel the stabbing pain right to my heart. She's mine.

"I have to find her," I tell him earnestly. "She's mine, Ares. I can't be without her. I

can't explain it, we haven't spent that much time together, and even though I've only known her for a year, I..."

"Is the god of love really falling?" Ares chuckles. I want to punch him in the face, but right now, there's pain shooting through my body each time I move.

"You're an asshole," I bite out.

He nods, knowingly, as he tells me honestly, "I know, and that's why we're friends." There's always been a camaraderie between us, an allegiance, and if Tarian were here, I'd feel it, too, because we are brothers. Perhaps not by blood, but by the loyalty that runs through our veins.

"We are. Brothers."

"Aww, you two make me swoon," Tarian saunters inside with a joint hanging from his lips. He wouldn't be able to do that if we were in a hospital. Glancing around, I notice that we're at the Lancaster mansion.

"Fuck you," Ares bites out as he rises, pulling the smoke from our friend's lips and inhaling a lungful before handing it back to Tarian. "Weed is good for healing, you should have some."

I hold out my hand for a toke on the joint, and Tarian hands it to me. Placing it between my lips, I pull in a deep breath and allow the smoke to fill my chest, and lungs then slowly let it out. The white cloud billows from my lips as I watch it dissipate.

"Tarian," I finally say. "There's something I need to talk to you about."

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“That’s my cue, I’ll see you both soon,” Ares saunters from the room, leaving me with Tarian. Once he settles in the chair that our other brother just vacated, he turns his blue gaze on me.

All these years, every time I looked at him, all I saw was his mother. He’s the spitting image of her, from his dark hair to those baby blues. And he uses them just like she did. For his benefit.

“What’s up? You look like shit. Those guys did a number on you,” he tells me after blowing out a white cloud and handing me the joint.

“What happened?”

“We found you in the office, knocked out, nothing but your phone and wallet on you. They clearly searched you for something.”

I wonder what it could’ve been they were looking for. “We need to find Rukaiya.”

“I know, we will. We always do what’s needed,” Tarian reminds me. He’s the brains behind this with his hacker intel. He’s a whizz on the computer, and I know he’ll be able to track her when he gets to his office. “What did you want to tell me?”

“I saw someone tonight, someone we thought had died.” I’m wary as I speak. I don’t want to anger him, but I also don’t want him to think I’m bullshitting him. “Tarian, I saw your mother,” I finally utter after a few moments.

“What do you mean?” He’s on his feet, the joint hanging limply from his lips, and I

notice it's almost done. He doesn't look at me as he paces. "She can't be alive. I watched her coffin get lowered into the ground."

"I know, we all did. But there's something I never told you. From before." My words halt him mid-step, and those blue eyes I'd come to know so well fill with something foreign.

"What?"

"I... It's difficult to say... I mean... I was young... Stupid..."

"What the fuck are you trying to say, Etienne?" Tarian's anger is volatile. He has something so violent that simmers beneath his cool, calm exterior. Ares and I have our rage issues, but when Tar loses his shit, it's like a hurricane sweeping through the house.

I know I can no longer hide it, and the confession whooshes from me like a deep breath I'd been holding for far too long. "I slept with your mother. I mean she seduced me, years ago. Before... I mean, I can't..."

"What the fuck did you just say?" The room takes on an icy chill which takes hold of me, seeping into my bones, racing down my spine, and I know this isn't going as well as I'd hoped. Well, I mean... how did I think it would go? "You fucked my mother?"

"Okay, time out, kids," Ares joins us once more, pulling Tarian back from the bed where I'm perched.

"He fucked my mother!"

I shouldn't have said it the way I did, but then again, what's a good way of saying something like that. There isn't one. "I wish I could take it back, but it happened. And

I'm so fucking sorry."

Blue eyes lock on mine, darkness takes hold of them, and for the first time since I met Tarian Calvert, I'm scared. "You are nothing to me." He pulls himself away from Ares and walks out the door, leaving us staring at each other.

The pain in my chest doesn't even come close to what I'd expected it to be. No. It's worse. So much fucking worse.

I just lost my best friend, and I'm sure he'll never forgive me.

14

Rukaiya

When I open my eyes, I find myself in a luxurious room. It's the same bedroom I changed in earlier. At least I think it was earlier. I was dragged from the inner circle, taken to what I'm guessing was Thane's office, and then I saw Etienne. Even in the darkness, I felt a stab of hope, which was quickly taken away, when two men jumped him from behind. They knocked him out because he wasn't alert; he was too worried about me.

That's the problem with my life; nobody can get close enough, or they'll get hurt. And this was evidence enough. I wanted him to run, to leave me be, but he didn't listen. I watched them beat him up as I was injected with something that had my eyelids falling closed.

This all feels like a fucking nightmare. A movie reel playing out on a large screen, but I'm right in the middle of it. I don't want to be, I want out. Pushing off the bed, I make my way to the door, knowing I'll find it locked. And I'm right. When I tug on the doorknob, it doesn't even twist.

My next idea is to pull open the curtains, so I race to the window and find the break in material, only to find the windows all locked up tight. But the view is what steals my breath. From here, I can see the town of Tynewood. We're high up on a hill that overlooks a forest, I can just about see the lake where Dahlia and I first came across the boys, and I also can see the university.

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If we're not that far away, I'm sure they can come back for me. Etienne knows I'm here, so Ares and Tarian must know as well. I don't know whose house I'm in, but they surely must know the man who was there last night, Thane.

I leave the curtains open and glance around. There are doors leading off from the bedroom, one in particular catches my eye, and I pad over to it. When it opens easily, I find myself in a bathroom that's tiled with shimmery black and white tiles. There's a corner bathtub that looks like it has jets built into it, and a large shower that can house at least three people.

The basin is double the normal size and perched on the countertop are small bottles of toiletries. Everything is immaculate, as if it was just built. Clean, pristine, and spotless.

I move to open the cupboards, hoping that I'll find something in there to pick a lock, but all I find are expensive, fluffy towels and a robe. Nothing else catches my eye.

I use the toilet and wash my hands, using the blueberry scented soap before making my way back into the bedroom. The light streaming in from the windows has brightened the bedroom, and I notice just how beautiful it is. Last night, it was too dimly lit to see the exquisite carvings on the walls.

I have to admit, it's a stunning room, and I'm sure the rest of the house is just as beautiful. I just wish I could get out of here. My small rucksack has nothing in it but my sweatpants, which I slowly change into, and I admonish myself for not bringing something I could use as a weapon.

There's not much else to do, so I settle on the mattress and stare out of the window. Summer has arrived, and the trees, along with the vast lawns below, are bright green. The sun warms me, and I close my eyes, praying with all I have that someone will come find me.

Suddenly, the door swings open, and when I turn to see who it is, I find my father staring back at me. He saunters inside, shuts the door, and I hear the lock click back in place.

"Rukaiya," he speaks, settling himself on the small stool at the vanity. Such a large, formidable man, and he's now perched on a tiny chair. "You'll need to stay here. I have things to do, which require me to fly back to London."

"You can't leave me here with these crazy people," I challenge. Even though my father is an asshole, staying here with a house full of strangers is not ideal.

"You'll be kept safe by Thane. He's promised me—"

"You believe some man who runs a secret organization?" I'm on my feet, closing the distance between me and my father as he watches me. Under this cool and calm exterior is a violent and savage man. "I cannot stay with people I don't know. Take me back to Tynewood, I'll stay with Dahlia."

"That's not an option," he sighs, shaking his head as if he feels bad for what he's just said, but I know my father, he doesn't feel any pain, remorse, or regret. This is a man who would sell his own daughter to get a seat on the throne.

"Why? What's so good about being in this society that you had to bring me here?" My voice cracks on the last word, and I silently berate myself for not being stronger. I have to be to survive this. But I want to cry and scream and beg him to release me.

“You’ll understand soon enough,” Dad tells me. “There are things that are being put in motion to keep you safe, Rukaiya. Things that will ensure you’re kept safe when everything falls apart.”

“You’re speaking in riddles, Dad. Please, I can go to Tynewood and finish school. All I want is a normal life.”

His gaze snaps to mine in the next instant. “You’ll never have a normal life.”

“Why?” I ask him in confusion. This makes no sense. I’m just a girl. Nothing about who I am is special; he’s told me that so many times as I grew up.

“I can’t explain it. Those are secrets that aren’t mine to divulge. Just know that even though I may not have been the best father, I did everything I could to keep you safe.”

“Safe?” I bite out in frustration. “You call this safe?” I wave my hands around me, gesturing to the opulent bedroom we’re standing in. In the exquisiteness of the room, there is violence that hangs heavily in the air. “I don’t feel safe in this house.”

“You’ve always been stubborn, and this is why I’ve brought you here. There are things going on that you don’t know about.”

“Then fucking tell me!” My frustration is evident because for the first time in my life, my father looks at me with shock at my outburst. I’ve always been the shy, quiet girl. I have never once raised my voice, gotten angry, or even allowed my pain to show. When my mother died, I focused on school, on dance, and on my best friend—Dahlia.

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“I can’t. You will find out everything you need to know with time.” He rises, straightening the material of his dark slacks before looking at me again. “I never meant to hurt you or your mother, but she was weak.” The ice that’s so apparent in his voice on a daily basis is back, and I don’t know what’s happened, but it’s as if a switch has been clicked. The man before me is a stranger once more.

“I think you’re the one who’s weak. Answering to monsters just to have a stupid crown and a cloak. That means nothing without a family.”

A small smile dances on his lips, curling his mouth upward at the corners. I know I’ve gotten to him, it’s clear, but something tells me he’s never going to allow me to forget this little outburst.

“You know what, leave me here. I will live with strangers because it’s better than living with a man I call father and not knowing him at all.”

There’s only a small wince in his expression that tells me he’s affected by what I’ve said. Nothing more, the mask is back in place, and I’m looking at him, unsure of what he’s about to do. I half expect him to hit me, strike me in the face, but he doesn’t.

My father stalks by me, heading to the door, before knocking twice. The lock clicks before he opens the door. I want him gone, but he stops for a second glancing over his shoulder to regard me.

“You’re strong, Rukaiya, you’re nothing like her. And soon, when you learn the truth, you’ll see just how right I am. Everything I did was to keep you safe. That’s what my job was. Nothing more, no love, no affection. Believe me when I say that you deserve

the best, and this is how it's meant to play out."

I want to ask him what the hell he means, but I don't have time, because in the next second, he's gone, and I'm banging on a closed, locked door. He hasn't made sense since he walked into the room, and when he walked out, he left me with more questions than I had before.

The night is cold, and I'm wrapped in my blanket. Momma is gone, I'm not sure where she went, but when Dad told her bad things, she ran out of the house into the darkness. She doesn't have a car. Daddy's got the keys. There aren't any people that Momma is friends with to ask for help, and I know even if she did, they wouldn't come near us.

Dad made sure that everyone in town stayed away from us. Even at school, the kids don't come near me, except for Dahlia. For some reason, Daddy likes Dahlia, and he allows me to play at her house a lot.

I shiver when I hear a door shutting down the hallway. There aren't any lights on, and I can't see what's happening. A song plays from somewhere in the house, and I know it's Dad's cell phone.

"Yeah?" His gruff voice comes from the other room. "I know. She's run off into the fucking night, and I can't go out to find her." He listens to the person on the other side, and I close my eyes, trying to focus and hopefully hear who he's talking to. If he slips up and says their name, I'll know. "I have the girl here," he tells the caller, and my heart breaks. A tear escapes and trickles down my cheek when he calls me that.

There are times he'd say my name or call me sweetheart, but most times, he just calls me girl. As if he's a stranger to me. It feels like he is most of the time.

"I'm not going back there. And you can come here if you want to see her. There's

nothing more I can do but follow the rules.” Dad sounds angry, his voice is low, almost like he’s growling. Like the dog from next door when he’s fighting with something or someone.

It’s quiet again, and I hear Dad’s footsteps coming toward my room. Shutting my eyes, I try to stop shivering. Even though I’m covered in a blanket, I’m cold, freezing.

“She’s asleep, so I think it’s best you do what you do, and I’ll watch them. Yasmine, this isn’t a fucking game,” Dad hisses into the phone. He’s so quiet now; I wonder if he thinks he’s going to wake me. I remember when I was little, he told me I slept like the dead, but now, I’m growing up, and I hear everything. Even when I’m not meant to.

The front door bangs, and Dad curses under his breath as he makes his way into the living room, and my eyes snap open again.

“She’s back,” he speaks, but I don’t know if he’s talking to Momma, who I’m sure has just walked in, or if he’s informing the person on the call.

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“Who is it?” Momma’s voice filters down the hall toward me. She’s crying, her sobs are louder than Dad’s voice, and it drowns out what he’s told her. “Tell her I’ll call her tomorrow.”

There’s silence after that and I hear Momma and Dad’s bedroom door shut. And that’s the last I ever heard him mention a lady called Yasmine.

A noise breaks through my daydream of what happened that night, but even after the memory, I don’t know what all this means. There isn’t anything that makes sense or even sticks out for me to piece the puzzle together.

The door swishes open, forcing me to my feet, and when I glance up, I’m met with the deep blue eyes of Thane.

“The princess is awake,” he grins. He’s handsome, strangely so, and I wonder if he’s related to one of the Crowns from Tynewood. There’s a familiarity about him that I can’t pinpoint.

“Are you letting me go?”

He laughs at my question, a chuckle that’s both filled with humor and darkness. He’s older, with an aura of confidence and calmness that seems to emanate from him. But he also has an aura of violence that seems to hang heavily over him.

“I don’t think so, little one.” He saunters into the room, leaving the door open. “Will you try to run?” he questions, noticing me glancing between him and the door, “because I do love to hunt.”

“You’re a monster,” I bite out.

“And Etienne Durand is not?” He arches a dark brow in question, stilling me from saying anything more. How would he know about Etienne? Unless he saw what happened in the office last night.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

He crosses his arms in front of his chest. The white button-up that he’s wearing tightens around his muscled arms as he closes himself off to me.

“I detest liars,” he tells me. “I’m not stupid, Rukaiya, the boy was here to fight for you. So, tell me,” he smirks, closing the distance between us. “What are you to him? Because when I kill him and his friends, I need to know just how heartbroken you’ll be.”

15

Etienne

Ares enters the room as I shift around trying to sit up, staring at him as he reaches me. It’s been one long fucking night, and Tarian is still refusing to talk to me. Peacemaker—Ares—has tried everything, but our friend is being stubborn. I’m still in pain, and every time I move, it feels as if there are broken bones, even though I know there aren’t.

“Where is he?”

“Talking to Dahlia,” Ares informs me as he settles down on the couch that’s set against the wall. The room is one of the many guest suites in the Lancaster mansion. I spent most of my childhood here, hiding from my mother and father, and when Dad

left, I mainly hid from mom. “Your dad called, he’s on his way Stateside.”

“Fuck, I don’t need him and his judgmental comments.” Running my fingers through my hair, I cast a glance at Ares who’s watching me. “What?”

“There’s something you need to know, something Tarian just figured out. He’s been at work hacking into the information my father left behind when he was taken in. There were a few files that had been encrypted, and we haven’t been able to figure them out until now.” Ares is normally the relaxed one out of the three of us, but when he’s serious, it sets me on edge.

“You’re freaking me the fuck out and that’s the last thing I need right now, man,” I tell him before the door swings open with a whoosh and Tarian walks in. He looks as fucked up as I feel, and I know it’s all my fault.

“I finally got into that last folder,” he tells Ares, not meeting my questioning gaze. I wish he’d just talk to me. Allow me to apologize for everything I’d done. I feel guilt weighing on me, and it hurts.

“What’s up?” Ares questions as he reaches for the pages in Tarian’s hands. I don’t know what’s on there, but something tells me it’s nothing good. I watch Ares scan the information before he looks up at me and hands me the information. I take the pages, my eyes roaming every bit of what’s on them. My gaze snaps to Tarian, and I know he’s angry, but not at me right now. No, he’s just found out his family is bigger than he’d initially thought. He’s no longer alone; he isn’t just an orphan anymore.

“Do you think Thane planned this?” I ask, hoping with all I have that my best friend speaks to me like he used to. Tarian and I were always closer than Ares and I. Having him look at me with rage and disdain, as well as disappointment, hurts more than I care to admit.

“I wish I knew. My uncle has always been underhanded, but I don’t know what to make of this. I mean...” his words filter off into the silence that’s so thick in the room that it makes it difficult to breathe.

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“I hope you’re ready for this,” Dahlia strolls into the room, looking breathtaking. Her dark hair is pinned up into a messy bun, and her curvy frame is encased in a dark green dress. She looks like a princess without a crown. And yet, I know she has one. Ares chose well; they look good together, I note, as she nears the chair and stops beside him.

She hands him the phone she’d been carrying. He places the device to his ear and speaks, “Yeah?”

Silence greets us, and Dahlia glances toward me with a small smile that reminds me of why my best friend fell for her. There’s also a sadness in her pretty eyes, and I realize she must be worried about Rukaiya. I know I am. My little wolf needs to be here with us. We’re her family, and nobody else will be good enough to care for her.

“We’ll find her,” I promise Dahlia who nods in agreement.

“I know, I’m just worried,” she whispers as she leans in to help me shift higher on the bed. She fluffs my pillow, and I wish I was able to do this shit on my own. I hate people doting on me. I’m a grown man, and I should be able to care for myself.

“Okay. I agree to the terms,” Ares talks to whoever is on the other end of the line. He’s tense. His shoulders stiff with anxiety. I wonder briefly if it’s his father. If not, then I’m unsure of who would be giving him an ultimatum. Another few seconds go by before he hangs up and looks at Tarian then me. “We need to talk.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask immediately, my stomach twisting with anxiety. “Is it Rukaiya?”

He nods. “Thane has her.” Upon his words, his eyes lock on Tarian. There’s no admission, but we know what that means. Tarian’s uncle isn’t a good man, and if he has Rukaiya, she can’t be safe.

“What does he want?”

“It’s not what he wants,” Ares starts. “He’s told me why he’s keeping her at the house.” He glances among the three of us, his expression solid, not giving away what he’s feeling or thinking, and it’s frustrating the fuck out of me.

“If you can just fucking tell us, we can fix it.”

“There’s no fixing this,” he shakes his head. “Apparently, Thane is convinced that Rukaiya is his daughter.” The words fall from his lips, but they don’t make sense. I’ve known Thane since I was a kid, and he was never the paternal type. He had many women in his bed; he loved to boast about it, but he didn’t have just one woman long enough who could be the mother of his child.

“That’s a fucking lie,” I bite out, pushing my legs over the edge of the bed, forcing myself to stand. “I’ve had enough of this bullshit. I’m going there to get her, and she’s coming home with me.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Tarian speaks to me, his blue gaze locked on mine in challenge, and I still all movement. “He’s my uncle. I can go there and bring her back.”

“And you think he’s just going to hand over someone who he believes is his daughter?” My words are filled with confusion and amusement. I know Thane, so do Tarian and Ares, and they both know that he will never give up something that he wants or that he believes is his.

“Listen,” Ares finally steps between us, “this might not be ideal, but at least we know that Thane won’t hurt her. She’s his blood, so we can buy time.”

“What did he want in exchange for her?” I finally ask the question that’s on everyone’s mind.

Ares glances at all of us again. “He wants to lead. He wants Abner’s spot at the table. He’s been waiting for years, and now that my father is no longer the Elder Crown, he thinks he deserves it since Dahlia’s father is dead, and he’s the next in line.”

“That’s bullshit. I’m not giving him anything,” Tarian’s outburst causes us all to turn to him. He looks like he’s about to lose his shit. I don’t blame him. His uncle is here, trying to take over the Sovereign. His mother is alive, and he’s just found out one of his best friends had been sleeping with her for the better part of his teenage years.

Not good.

Not good at all.

“Can we have a minute?” I ask Ares and Dahlia. They both look at me, their faces a picture of worry, but when Tarian nods, they leave us in the bedroom, and I settle back on the mattress, watching my best friend.

“I don’t need—”

“I’m not doing this or saying this for you or for me; I’m going to tell you everything for the friendship I held close to me. You’re like family to me, and I need you to hear this from me. Before you hear any rumors or lies.”

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Blue eyes land on me, and he looks me over for a moment, assessing me, before he nods.

“I was a stupid teenager. I hated my home life, and she offered me something I never had — affection. I fell for it. I shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t help it. Call it mommy issues or some shit, but I craved the attention that she gave me.”

“But she’s my mother, Etienne,” he implores me, confusion creasing his brows as he looks up at me again.

“I know. I know. Trust me, this isn’t one of my prouder moments.” Shaking my head, I tug my fingers through my hair before I look at him again. “I should’ve told you sooner, but I was ashamed that I did what I did. I didn’t want you to know how weak I was when I should’ve been stronger. I’m a Crown, and I fucked up. I’m not proud of what I did. And I wish I could take it back. But, I can’t, and I hope that somewhere in there,” I wave my finger around toward his head before I continue, “I hope to fuck you can forgive me.”

Tarian looks at me for a long while, and I fully expect him to disagree and tell me to go fuck myself. We’ve always been honest with each other, and I don’t expect anything less right now.

“You’re an asshole, Etienne,” he tells me earnestly. “And I want to punch you. I really want to knock you the fuck out for doing what you did, but I also know that it wasn’t only you. She’s responsible for her own actions. And right now, we have too much other shit to worry about, man. There are too many lives at stake. Rukaiya could be my cousin, you’ve slept with my mother, and my uncle, he’s about to die, by

my hand.”

“No. You can’t focus on that,” I lean toward him, gripping his shoulders, as I pull myself up, and he holds me steady. “Look at me,” I order when he doesn’t meet my questioning gaze. Tarian obeys, his blue eyes land on my dark ones. “Killing him won’t justify what he did. He needs to pay in other ways.”

He stares at me for a long while before he grins and nods. “Then he will, but it will be me who doles out the punishment.”

16

Rukaiya

I’m bored.

Thane allowed me out of the bedroom, but I’m still locked in the house with men watching my every move. I’ve been leafing through photo albums all morning, and when I finally rise from the sofa, I notice it’s almost one in the afternoon. I don’t know what to believe anymore. He told me my father, Fergus, is nothing more than a soldier doing his duty. But that doesn’t make sense. Thane didn’t explain why or how, but what Thane did promise me is as soon as he returns tonight, I’ll learn the truth.

“So, you’re the pretty little girl who’s got Thanatos in a twist.” A woman saunters into the living room, and the moment my gaze lands on her, my breath is knocked from my lungs.

I’ve only known Tarian for a short while, but the woman before me is the spitting image of the young man who I came to know when I first started at Tynewood University. He’s one of the Crowns, one of Etienne’s best friends.

“Who are you?” Even though I ask the question, I know it’s futile because it’s clear who she is. She must be Tarian’s mother, which makes little sense, because I thought he was orphaned when he was younger.

Before she can answer, the doorbell chimes through the lower part of the house, echoing in every corner. It doesn’t take long for one of the men dressed all in black to leave us and return moments later with Mrs. Durand in tow.

“Yasmine,” she greets the woman I’m certain is Tarian’s mother with a familiarity that confirms my suspicions. They look like they’ve known each other all their lives, and Mrs. Durand doesn’t look like she’s shocked to see her friend is alive and well.

“What’s going on here?” I ask, crossing my arms in front of me, trying to hide from the two sets of eyes that land on me.

“Is this her?” Etienne’s mother smirks as she strolls closer to me in her black Jimmy Choos. She reaches for my hair, tugging one of the braids toward her, her fingers feeling the strands before she releases me. “Pretty enough. Looks just like a Calvert.”

“I look nothing like anyone,” I bite out in frustration. They both regard me, Yasmine’s blue eyes dance with amusement at my rudeness, but right now, I don’t feel very respectful to either of the women in my company.

“I take it Thane hasn’t explained anything to you?” Yasmine settles herself on the sofa I’ve just vacated, her long, sleek black dress hugs every curve of her frame. She’s exquisite, her beauty matches my mother’s with her tanned skin and dark hair. The only difference is my mother had dark eyes, and Yasmine’s are a deep blue, just like her son’s.

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“He hasn’t told me what the hell I’m doing here. He also hasn’t told me when I can leave, which is what I’d like to do. So, if you’ll excuse me, I’d much rather head back home and leave you to do whatever it is you wish.”

“No wonder my son is so enamored by you,” Mrs. Durand laughs, the sound is low and husky, as if she’s been smoking all her life. But her voice is nothing like that. Instead, it’s a smooth, low tone that reminds me of my own mother’s when she was trying to calm me down.

“What?”

“Etienne is rather taken with you, darling,” she tells me something I already knew. “Isaac, my ex-husband, told me our son has been doing stupid things to ensure your safety. He was always more of a lover than a fighter.” Her gaze lands on Yasmine, a pointed look that tells me something happened between the two women. Perhaps something had been going on between Etienne and his best friend’s mother.

A shudder trickles through me when I think of him with someone else, let alone a woman who is old enough to be his mother. I don’t at all judge those who have certain needs, but to me, there’s something icky about it. Mainly because I know Etienne isn’t that much older than me. And Tarian’s mother has been thought dead for a long while, which means it would’ve happened years ago.

“When can I go home?” I ask again, tired of the back and forth game that’s so clearly going on in this house. Nobody wants to offer any truths, and it’s frustrating me.

“You are home, dear,” Yasmine smiles, and I take in her expression, how her curious

gaze dances over me. “I think you’re misled in wanting to leave here before Thane has had his meetings. You’re part of the agreement,” she tells me.

“What agreement?”

“That’s enough,” the deep timber of the older man echoes through the living room as he enters wearing a dark suit that hugs every curve of his broad shoulders, tapered hips, and his thick, muscled thighs. His dark hair is tousled with gel, and his eyes glow when they land on me. “Go to my office,” he barks the order before anyone can argue.

My feet move quickly as I leave the room and make my way down the hall.

I’m settling in one of the chairs opposite the desk when Thane finally joins me. He’s taken off his jacket, and now I notice how his shirt is practically molded to his frame. Once he’s seated, he looks over at me, taking in every inch of me.

He steeples his fingers under his chin before he speaks. “You know, you’re quite feisty for someone who is—”

“Being held prisoner?” I ask, not caring anymore who I insult because this is getting ridiculous. “I just want to go home.”

“What if I told you that you are home?” he challenges, and I’m tempted to laugh it off, but his serious expression has me thinking otherwise.

“I’ll never be home in this place,” I admit, hoping it stings him when I’m rude, but he seems unaffected by my sass. “It’s illegal to keep me here.”

“Is it?” This time his challenge is filled with amusement as if I’m being an errant child not listening to her parents. The thought stills me, and my mind is filled with

something that I'd pushed down long ago—the idea that I'm not really Fergus's daughter.

“I mean... none of this makes sense. Why would my father leave me with you? Someone I don't know. How can he trust I'll be safe here?”

“I've known your father for a long time, Rukaiya. Since before we were even at college. He grew up near Tynewood, and when he left, I asked for his help.” Thane sighs as if remembering the time as he reminisces. “When I was seventeen, I was young, rich, and born to a family that offered me everything in my wildest dreams.”

His blue eyes land on me. Emotion flickers in them, more so than I've seen in the past few hours since we met. Last night, he was cold, almost closed off to any affection, but right now, there's someone new looking at me. No longer a stranger, but someone I want to know and learn more about.

“I met a girl when I was finishing up high school. As much as Fergus told me to steer clear, I didn't listen. I was used to getting what I wanted. And she was everything to me, but...” His words taper off into nothing, filtering into the vast space between us, and I hang on every murmur because I need to know the truth.

He moves the paperwork on the desk, shuffling the pages in a white folder around, until he finds what he's looking for. He rises from his seat and rounds the desk as he gazes down at whatever is on the white sheet.

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“I didn’t want to tell you like this. It’s not ideal, but it’s the only way I know how. I’ve kept this a secret for almost twenty years. My mistake, my error, that has cost me everything.” He turns his blue gaze from the page to my questioning stare. “But no more. I’m not letting whatever the past has held me accountable for keep me from letting you know the real reason you’re here.”

Thane hands me the pages. Printed out documents that confirm what my mind was reeling with moments ago. It’s the evidence I was waiting to find, but never could. The confirmation in black and white, and even now, as I stare at it, I don’t believe it.

Perhaps, I don’t want to. Maybe all I want is to let this sink in and find out it’s a cruel joke. I don’t want it to be real, but I also do. How is that even normal?

“Is this... I mean...” I look up, begging him with a mere glance to tell me he’s lying. That this is all fabricated and he isn’t who I now know him to be.

But I’m not that lucky. I’ve never been one for those stupid lucky charms. Nothing in my life came because of chance. It was all just thrown at me, and I had to accept it.

“Are you...?”

Thane nods, and my chest tightens painfully. Breathing becomes difficult, and I know I’m lost to the truth. And it’s brutal, raw, and volatile. Just like love.

And when he finally voices it, when he finally utters the words, I feel like my heart is slowly cracking, one shard at a time.

“I’m your father.”

17

Etienne

I’m no longer alone in the house. I can hear the noise from the kitchen, living room, and even the garden. The Lancaster mansion has been my home for two long days, and I’m tired. We were ordered to wait for Isaac to arrive.

When he lands in a couple of hours, I’m going straight to the Calvert house to find out what the fuck is going on. I can’t sit here waiting for them to come to us. All I know is Dad got a message from Thane to confirm that Rukaiya is still alive; she’s so close, but so fucking far it’s unbelievable.

Tarian hasn’t spoken a word to me yet, well, not something he could say through Ares. I don’t know if he’ll ever forgive me for what happened, but I certainly will force him to acknowledge the fact that I was nothing more than an innocent youth at the time.

Ares saunters into the conservatory as I sip on the lemonade that Dahlia brought out to me. I’m still in pain, but I can’t just sit around and wait for shit to happen. I can walk, somewhat, and I’m able to bathe myself, which is a plus. But I don’t want to leave, not yet. If I do, it means going home to the place where I grew up, where memories of my mother and father still linger.

There’s always been hate that lived within the walls of our home, and even now, I recall all those spots—corners in our house that hold the guilt and shame—where my parents would fight, where they would hiss and sneer at each other.

“You feeling okay?” Ares questions as he flops onto the sofa opposite me. He’s

wearing an old pair of jeans and a wifebeater that shows off the asshole's muscles. Looks like he's been working out again, big time.

"Yeah, I'm all good. I'm contemplating going home." I meet his gaze, and all he does is nod. He knows what's up. There's never been secrets between us, so he knows my family is as fucked up as his. "Once Isaac gets here, I need to get Rukaiya," I tell him.

"We will. I promise we will." Nodding, I settle back against the cushions and drink up the last of the cool liquid before looking over at Ares again. He's pondering, I can tell by the look on his face—pensive, thoughtful, and serious.

"What if something has happened to her and they're stalling?" I finally ask the question that's been weighing me down all night. All day. It's been running like a godforsaken loop inside my head since I woke up.

"She's alive, there's nothing wrong." Ares looks so sure, so confident in his new position as second in command. Philipe, his brother, is back in New York, and I know the second he learns about what's been going on, he'll be in Tynewood.

"Have you called your bro?"

Ares looks over at me. "No, not yet. If we don't know what the hell is going on, I can't give him a proper update. When he left, he told me I'm running things here." I know there's a lot of pressure on Ares, especially now. "Once your father gets here and we can talk to him, I'm hoping we have a clearer idea of why Thane is so adamant about wanting to be back in Tynewood."

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“He’s Rukaiya’s father,” Tarian’s voice comes from the doorway, catching our attention as he enters the room. Dressed in his signature black boots, T-shirt, and jeans, he looks like he’s ready for someone’s funeral.

“Have we got the actual birth records?” I question, sitting up straighter as he hands me the folder he’s carrying.

Tarian nods. “The paperwork I found earlier wasn’t clear because those were emails back and forth, but I’ve managed to get the paternity test he did when she was born. He hid them well, but I managed to hack into the medical records from nineteen years ago. It seems Rukaiya’s mother had an affair with my uncle. But there’s still something that doesn’t make sense. Why would Fergus play daddy?”

Flipping through the pages, I note the names on the blood tests. Fergus’s email is in here, too, one to his lawyer requesting his cheating wife get a paternity test done.

“How would he have figured out she had an affair?” This question comes from Ares, glancing at Tarian as he grabs the folder.

“It seems Fergus Harrison could never have children. Before he met Rukaiya’s mother, he was engaged. He and the fiancée in question tried for months to have kids, when nothing came of it, he went to the doctor. They told him he’ll never be able to father any children.”

“So that means she’s your cousin?” I quip, looking up at the blue eyes that have landed on mine.

Tarian regards me for a long time before he nods. “Seems like you just can’t keep your dick away from my family.”

“Look, man—”

“I’m kidding, I mean... I spoke to Dahlia, she gave me some solid advice,” he tells me. “You weren’t old enough to even know right from wrong back then.” He settles on the sofa beside me, his hand gripping my shoulder in a show of forgiveness and brotherhood. “I can’t let shit like this that’s meant to be stuck in the past come between us. As for my mother...” His words taper off into nothing.

There’s a heavy silence in the air, and I can tell there’s something more he wants to say, whether it’s about me or his mother. I’m on the edge of my seat.

“Spill the beans, Tar,” Ares finally urges him, before setting the documents on the table in the center of the room.

“Well... I have a feeling my mother had my dad killed. I think she’s been with Thane for the past few years, living with him...” Once again, he doesn’t explain further, allowing us to figure it out on our own, and it’s not difficult to come to a conclusion.

“But that makes no sense.”

“Oh, it makes all the sense in the world.” My mother strolls in, her smile is filled with satisfaction, but it’s as cold as ever.

“Mother.”

“Mrs. Durand.” Ares rises to greet her. He’s always been her favorite, which is fine by me. As long as I don’t have to deal with her bullshit, I’m happy.

“Oh, Ares, you know you don’t have to call me that, it’s Hilary.” Her grin is perfectly chilled. Even though she has affection that’s always directed toward Ares, she doesn’t offer much more than a smile and her air kisses, which mean nothing.

“Hilary, what can we do for you?”

“Thane has agreed to allow Rukaiya to return to Tynewood,” she tells us. “On one condition.” Her gaze trails over each of us, as if she’s committing us to memory for some reason. We spent our teenage years at home, where she would dote on Ares as if he were hers.

“And what’s that Mother? Stop with the theatrics. We don’t have time for this bullshit.” I have no respect for the woman.

“He’d like to have Tarian over for dinner. He wants to mend fences so to speak.” Her hardened glare lands on the man seated beside me. I know he hates his uncle for whatever happened in the past and learning that he’s got a cousin he never knew about must only add to the tension between them.

Tarian turns to me, his stare is pleading, as if he’s asking me for permission to refuse. I can’t force him to do anything. Even though I’d like to have my girl back here, he has to make the choice.

The only thing I offer him is a nod. It’s okay. If he doesn’t want to do it, we’ll find another way. Blackmail and forcing our hand is not the way Thane is going to earn his nephew’s respect.

“Well?” Mother places her hands on her hips as if she’s about to admonish Tarian for stalling. Her dark brow arched in question, regarding him with her shrewd glare.

I expect Tarian to refuse, to tell her to go to hell, and I’ll gladly stand behind him, but

when he finally answers her, he shocks me with his response. “Fine, but the only way I’ll do it is if the girl gets here first, then I go.

18

Rukaiya

I recognize the Lancaster mansion as soon as the car pulls up the driveway. It doesn't take long for the man who has been sitting in the passenger seat silently to exit the stopped vehicle and open the back door.

He tugs me from the seat, along with my small rucksack and nothing more. I have the documents Thane gave me regarding my father, well, him, but I still don't believe it's true. Even though it's there in black and white, I've not allowed the truth to seep into my mind, let alone my heart.

He didn't want to tell me about my mother, or why he hinted that she's still alive, and everything happened so quickly from his admission in the office to us leaving. The main door of the house swings open, and Dahlia races toward me.

"Oh my god," she squeals, tugging me into her arms, and all the emotion I've been holding back finally breaks free, and I cry. I hear the door of the car shut and the vehicle pull away, but nothing else matters because I'm finally here.

I'm not entirely sure what the deal is, what they had to give Thane in exchange for me, but I'm thankful for whatever it was. The sweet fragrance of Dahlia's perfume is so familiar, yet I feel like I'm dreaming, and it's all in my imagination.

She steps backward, taking me in, her hands still holding onto me as if I could disappear if she lets me go.

“Welcome back,” Ares joins us. He has a smile plastered on his face, and before I can respond, he pulls me into a fierce hold. I’ve only ever had Dahlia as a friend. I never had a group of people who cared for me like this, and the relief that they’re here washes over me.

With all the tears and hugs, someone clears their throat, and my attention is brought to the person standing on the steps behind Ares. The man who tried to fight for me. He’s still got some bruising on his face, but most of it has healed.

His dark eyes are watchful, as if he’s unsure if he can come closer. I nod, giving him a silent response, and he moves closer, his hands cup my face, and he holds me steady. Everything else disappears then.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get to you,” he whispers to me painfully. “I fucking failed you.”

“No,” I tell him, shaking my head.

Etienne’s gaze lingers on mine, searching for the truth. And he’ll find it because he wasn’t meant to save me. I told him once, and I’ll tell him again, I don’t need a knight in shining armor; I just want someone to walk beside me.

“You’re here, where you needed to be. I had to go through that on my own because it made me realize something, I didn’t know I felt.”

His brows furrow in confusion. “And what is that?”

“That I want this... As dangerous as it is. Us. We’re always going to have people trying to break us apart—”

“Isn’t this sweet,” Hilary Durand mutters from behind me, and I notice her exiting the Lancaster home. I didn’t realize she was here, and if I’d known, I would’ve told

Etienne about his mother's hand in all this. The honesty that I need to give him has to come from me, though, he needs to know who I really am.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was visiting with my son,” she smirks, and I know it's a lie. I overheard her telling Yasmine how they don't get on. “Even after the truth has been revealed, he seems to be rather caught up with you.” Her remark both angers me and makes my stupid heart flutter. “Give us a moment, will you, little girl.”

She waves her hand toward me, as if she's attempting to shoo me away. I should fight back, refuse to leave, but I want to talk to Dahlia, without Etienne around, so I cast a glance his way before I shoulder my bag and make my way into the house, ignoring his whisper of I'm sorry.

I'm not at all angry with Etienne; it's not his fault. But I know the moment all the twisted plans fall into place that it's either going to break us apart, or it's going to make us stronger. Whatever happens, I just hope I make it out alive.

I find Dahlia in the kitchen; she's at the stove stirring something in a pot, and the scent coming from it is delicious, making my stomach growl in response. She glances up to smile at me, and my heart aches. I've missed her so much. Best friends for so long, and I was stolen from her without so much as a letter.

“I can't believe you're here,” she tells me, setting the spoon down and making her way toward me. She takes my hands, holding them as she watches me. “I was worried. I thought I had done something wrong.”

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“Why on earth would you think that?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. You know how I am. Sometimes, just a little bit silly.” Her expression is filled with amusement, reminding me of all the laughs we’ve had over the years. Since junior high school, we have always found something to laugh about. Whether it was our failing crushes on the popular boys at school or a pop quiz we well and truly flunked.

“You know, after all this time away, I’ve had time to think about where I’m headed.” She settles on a high stool at the breakfast counter and tugs me to sit on the one beside her. “I so much wanted to go back to DC, but...”

I think about her, Ares, Tarian, but most of all, I think about Etienne. He cares for me, and it’s no longer a secret that I care for him, too. But I don’t know if I’ll ever be free of my past to think about a relationship. Outside, I wanted to admit that to him, but his mother walked out, breaking the moment.

“Tell me, Cupcake,” Dahlia urges, using my nickname from our younger years. It makes me laugh, but only for a second, before I remember why I’m really here.

“Fergus isn’t just going to walk away if he doesn’t get what he wants.” She nods, and I continue, “And Thane, who apparently is my real father, I mean... How do I even come back from that?”

“Who says you need to come back from it? I lost my father, I watched him get shot right in front of me.” Her admission hurts my heart, and my soul cries for my best friend. “But I healed somehow. Ares was there for me, helping me even through a

few dark moments, and I can promise you one thing, even though I don't have any family who are related by blood, I feel more loved now than I ever have been."

"And you're okay with just being here?"

She smiles; it's a sad, yet friendly one. I've seen my best friend for so many years, but right now, in this kitchen, she's all grown up. She's a woman, and I feel like a child beside her.

"Nothing is ever easy, and I can't tell you it will be, but we're a family—the boys and me, and we have Billy who comes over every week to check up on us. We're all grown up, Cupcake," she grins happily. "It's time we make our own path."

"You're right." I nod.

"Do you want to rest for a while? I'm making dinner, and we can sit tonight and talk as long as you want." My best friend has been turned into a housewife before my eyes.

"Who knew you'd be cooking for the boys," I laugh, and we both burst into a fit of giggles. The tension that hung heavily over us dissipates somewhat, and I finally believe I'm going to be okay.

Her smile is filled with happiness; it's real, and I can't help but feel a slight hint of jealousy that she's got what I always wanted. A real family. It's something I know my mother wanted for me, she tried to run, and she couldn't get away. Now I learn that my father is an evil maniac.

"Let me show you to the guest room," Dahlia tells me, breaking through the dark thoughts that take hold of me. As she leads me through the kitchen to the staircase, I notice Etienne and his mother still having a heated debate. I want to know what

they're saying, but I have to follow Dahlia. "This is yours. I'll leave you to get settled and see you downstairs for dinner."

With a long hug, one that makes my chest ache, she leaves me to do my thing, and I can't help but feel less nervous now that I'm in my own space.

The bedroom, that's now mine, is stunning. It's bigger than the apartment I stayed in with dad, Fergus, after mom died. Settling on the mattress, I glance around, feeling exhaustion consume me.

I lie back and shut my eyes, hoping that sleep will be kind, and I won't have any nightmares tonight.

19

Rukaiya

A resounding click causes my eyes to snap open, and I shoot up from the dreamless sleep that held me in its warmth. When I turn my gaze to the doorway, I find Etienne standing on the threshold watching me.

He's leaning on the doorframe, his arms crossed in front of his chest, and his smirk firmly in place. Every inch of him is covered in black material—jeans, T-shirt, and socks. He's not wearing shoes, and I wonder briefly if I'm daydreaming.

"I didn't want to wake you," he speaks, breaking the spell and clearing my sleep riddled brain. "You looked so peaceful, but I needed to talk to you." He enters the room, without asking permission, and shuts the door behind him. Once again, the click echoes louder than I expect it to. The silence that surrounds us feels heavy, as if Etienne is bringing bad news. And I don't want that, I need good news.

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He stops at the balcony door, which is currently shut, and I watch as he twists the small metal key and pushes the glass pane open. A soft breeze floats inside, causing the curtains to dance.

His gaze lands on mine when his head turns toward me. Dark eyes pierce me, they shine as my inner wolf—that Etienne likes to call me—awakens. The feelings I have been hiding from him come alive as he watches me, and I wonder if he’s trying to look right through me, to the very soul of who I am.

I wonder if this could ever be more than physical attraction. We’re both so broken from what our families put us through. I wonder if he could ever love. If he can’t I think I could survive just having him in my life. I think.

I need him right now though, but I don’t voice my feelings. Fear holds me back from admitting what I want. If he could take me, make me forget the past few months have happened with a harsh, fast fuck, I’d take it.

He stares at me, and I know he can see what’s in my heart, what’s hidden in the depths of my soul. I want him to see it, to find it and to bask in it. But I don’t make a move to get closer to him.

“What’s the time?” I finally ask in an attempt to break the heavy tension between us.

“It’s almost six,” he tells me, and with a quick glance outside, I notice the sun is nearly gone, and the sky has darkened considerably. I’m still tired. My body needs rest, but I can’t close my eyes when he’s here.

I don't want to lose a moment with him. My feelings for him are foreign to me. With Etienne, I feel different, as if I could have a normal life. But when I think about how torn apart my family is, I know the word 'normal' doesn't fit in my life. Learning my father isn't really my father, I still feel as if this is all a horrible dream, and I'll wake up to my old bedroom and Dahlia giggling about something I said. But I know it's not, because the harsh reality is that Thane is my father.

"I was so tired."

"You were. It's understandable." He smiles at me, his mouth tilting up at the corners, and he takes a couple of steps, closing the distance between us. "I want to ignore this."

Tipping my head back, I look directly into his eyes and question, "Ignore what?"

"Us." That one word tumbles from his lips, but it's not affectionate, he sounds almost broken by the admission. He turns away from me and faces the window.

"There is no us, Etienne," I remind him. This argument will go in circles if I don't stop it. "We could possibly fuck, and get it over with," I suggest, but he doesn't turn at my words.

I watch as the muscles in his back tense when he feels me near him. The heat of his body is like a fire blazing, and it lights something in me.

"Is that what you want?"

He spins on his heel, almost knocking me on my ass. "I don't do love, so fucking sounds good." His voice is gravelly and rough, dripping with desire, before he offers me his hand.

I stare at it for a long while, wondering what I should do. There's a tether between us, it's taut, pulled far too tight, and the sexual tension that's simmering whenever we're near each other is palpable.

"I never asked for love, and I certainly never wanted you to save me." My words are true, and he knows it. There's no denying that he can take me right now, and tomorrow, we'll fall out of bed sated.

But I have a feeling this thing between us is more than that. I don't know why, but it's strong, like a magnet pulling me toward him at every turn. As much as I want to push him away, I also want to pull him closer, and that's what makes him so dangerous.

He can so easily take my heart if I'm not careful and I would let him because as much as I want to convince myself I can't love him I don't know how else to explain my feelings toward him. The fear that I hold onto is the only thing keeping me from running—the fear of not ever seeing Etienne Durand again.

"My mother doesn't approve of my choices," he tells me, as if it's an outburst he needed to get out before something happened between us.

"Of me, or your life choices?"

"You, mostly." His voice seems far away, as if he's lost in thought, but I want to bring him back. I need him here, in this room, with me. I allow my fingers to touch his shoulder, and I feel the muscles ripple beneath my fingertips.

“And do you agree with her?”

“No.” He answers immediately. There wasn’t even a second of doubt in his response. It’s clear there’s something more between us, if only I can make him see that he shouldn’t be afraid to admit it. But then again, I should stop pushing him away.

Etienne turns toward me again, his gaze trailing over me, from head to toe, and back again. When his dark eyes lock on mine, they narrow for a moment before he reaches behind his neck and tugs his T-shirt off.

The material hits the floor, and soon enough, his jeans have joined the discarded item. He stops when he’s standing before me in his boxers.

“I want you,” he tells me earnestly. “I need to feel you, to be inside you. Something deep in my gut is pulling me toward you, and I can’t stop it.”

“Like a hurtling rollercoaster that’s not going to stop anytime soon,” I speak, linking my arms around his neck. I’m only wearing a tank top, and the heat of him turns my own body hot and needy.

“Pretty much,” he grins wolfishly, the mischievous glint in his eyes burns through my defenses, and Etienne lifts me up against him, my legs wrapping around his waist, as he carries me to the bed.

Setting me down, his mouth finds mine. Our lips fuse, and our tongues dance with each other as he steals my every breath and replaces it with his own. My hips rise to meet his, and his hands grip my body in a vise-like hold, keeping me steady as he

takes the memories of the past few days and replaces them with him.

Only him.

“Etienne!” Ares’s voice bounces through the door. He knocks three times and waits.

“Fuck,” Etienne curses through clenched teeth. “What?” He calls to the closed door, and I pray Ares will leave us, but we’re not so lucky.

“Meeting, in my office, NOW.”

“Jesus, you’re a fucking cock block, man,” Etienne bites out in frustration. He places one last kiss on my lips before he rises, pulls on his jeans, and grabs his tee. “Stay here, I’ll be back for you, little wolf.”

It’s a promise that makes my core clench. With a wink, he walks out of the bedroom, leaving me wet and needy for him.

We’re bad for each other, but I no longer care.

I want Etienne Durand.

20

Etienne

I watch her sleep. She’s beautiful, flawless, as she breathes softly, and I can’t prevent my chest from tightening when I think about what’s to come. She’s right; Fergus won’t stop, and neither will Thane.

Even though love isn’t something I see myself giving freely, I enjoy my time with

Rukaiya. My walls are being chipped away with every smile she gifts me, but I learned from my parents that those grins, those promises don't always mean forever.

The sun is slowly setting on the horizon, making the room shimmer with a bright orange glow. The light streams over my little wolf's body, which only makes my dick respond as I take in her smooth, silky flesh.

"You know, that would be considered stalking," she mumbles as her lashes flutter up at me, causing me to chuckle at her sass.

"Oh? And you're not blushing because I'm staring at you?" I ask, leaning in to taunt her with a kiss that I don't give. She lifts up quickly, pressing her lips against mine. The softness of her mouth elicits a growl from me, and I can't stop from deepening the kiss. My tongue darts out, licking against hers to taste her sweet flavor, which I can't get enough of. I'm a hungry monster who would devour her in one sitting. And I'd do it easily.

"We have to go down for dinner," she mumbles against my lips, breaking the kiss that I was rather enjoying. I'd rather stay up here and fuck her, but she's right, we should get something to eat.

"You know, we didn't really decide on what we're going to do." She's right, but I don't want to think about all the shit we're going to have to get through. My father is landing in a few minutes, and once he arrives, we're going to have to tell him about Thane and Yasmine.

My dad knew Tarian's parents. They were best friends all their lives and knowing that he's about to find out Yasmine is alive is not going to ease the tension that's already twisted itself around this situation. There's an impending storm when secrets are spilled, especially with ghosts coming back from the dead.

“I know we still have a lot to work through,” I tell her. “But little wolf, you’ve been through the worst, and you know why?”

She shakes her head, her innocence shining through. Even though she’s convinced she doesn’t need a hero to save her, she can’t deny that having someone beside her makes it easier.

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“Because I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere. It doesn’t matter how much you push, I’ll pull.” It’s a promise, one that I don’t intend on breaking any time soon. She needs stability, and I know being here with Dahlia, Ares, Tarian, and myself will make that possible. And somehow, I’ll figure out what the fuck we are.

“I just don’t want to cause any more trouble than I already have,” she tells me, scooting up, so she’s perched in my arms.

“Rukaiya,” I whisper along her mouth, cupping her cheek in my hand. “You’re not causing any trouble. There are people in this world who think that having wealth beyond measure will allow them to get away with shit. Thane should’ve been there from the moment you were born.”

“I guess. But I think I would’ve turned out like an asshole if Thane were my father.” She smiles. “I don’t think I would’ve had such a good head on my shoulders. Fergus made me stronger because of how he would abuse us, my mother and me, and I vowed I would never be in a situation like that with someone.”

“And you never will be. You’re strong, I can see it, you’re nothing like him.” The words are easy to say because they’re true. She’s strong, resilient, and beautiful. And seeing her sad bothers me more than I care to admit.

“Fergus was harsh, rude, and vile. I learned how to close myself off; it was easier to deal with him then. I grew into someone who can survive on my own. I’m a lone wolf, Etienne, I don’t need anyone.” Her sadness is palpable, and I want it to go away as fast as it possibly can. I hate seeing her pained or hurt.

“You don’t?” She quickly glances up at my question, and I continue, “Need someone? Because I have it on good authority that the position of personal bodyguard and hero is vacant.”

A giggle tumbles from her lips, the sound is a melody I never want to stop listening to. “Is it now?”

“Definitely, and I know a great candidate who will fill the position really well,” I murmur as I push her back onto the mattress and settle between her thighs. Her heat is right at my crotch, causing me to roll my hips against her.

“Then he better fill it quickly, because I’m hungry, and I’m sure Dahlia’s finished dinner already.” She sasses me, and I can’t help but growl as I go in for the kill.

“Do we want to know?” Ares asks as we enter the living room twenty minutes later, and I know I look like shit. My shirt is rumpled, and my hair looks like it’s just been in a windstorm because Rukaiya thought it would be a good idea to tangle her fingers in the strands as I tasted her.

“Well, if you want to know, I’m happy to swap stories,” I chuckle, earning me a slap on the shoulder from Rukaiya.

“You’re both terrible.” Dahlia rolls her eyes only to have Ares tug her onto his lap and tickle her ribs until she’s calling out mercy. “The dinner is in the oven, make yourselves at home.” My best friend’s girl tells us. This has been my safe haven for a long time. I doubt Dahlia knows about my past because she’s still learning about the friendship between the three guys. And I hope that Rukaiya will feel as at home here as I always do.

We make it into the kitchen without tearing each other’s clothes off and manage to fill two plates with pasta and salad, before joining the rest of the gang in the living

room. Tarian enters with a girl behind him, and I recognize her instantly—Grecia Birchwood. The eldest daughter of one of the retired Crowns. Her father stepped down along with Abner and Harding, and she would've been a Crown if she wanted it. After Dahlia joined the Sovereign, we opened the membership to females.

Years ago, men were the only ones allowed in the society, but after Abner's arrest, Philipe, Ares, Tarian, and I decided that Dahlia was worthy of a Crown since her father was one.

But Grecia refused the honor; instead, she's managed to get a job alongside Tarian. The two of them have been working together for the past two months. I've noticed how she looks at him, but he hasn't mentioned her in our conversations, which makes me wonder if he even realizes she's crushing hard on him.

"Hi everyone," she greets, offering us a smile that reminds me of her mother. Shaking my head, I nod, focusing on my plate. I realize there's still the little issue about me and Tarian's mother I have to tell Rukaiya about, and I'm not sure she's going to be happy about it. Tarian is still wary around me, and I gather it's going to take time for him to fully forgive me.

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I know he said he understands and doesn't blame me, but I know he's still thinking about the reason I didn't tell him. Knowing that my feelings were stupidly immature makes the guilt grip my chest every time I think about it. As much as we all want to move on, it's difficult because there's always going to be lingering memories.

"What are you doing here?" I focus my attention on Grecia.

"Oh, uhm, Tarian invited me." Her hazel green gaze lands on him, and he shrugs nonchalantly, as if it doesn't matter, but I can tell that she's hoping he'll introduce her as more than just a friend or fellow Sovereign baby.

"Figured the more heads we can put together to sort this shit out, the better," he tells us, leaning back on the sofa as he regards us with a smirk. Something is going on with him.

"What happened with Thane?" I ask, hoping he'll explain why he's so calm and relaxed after seeing his uncle. But his gaze is solely on Rukaiya when he answers.

21

Rukaiya

"Well, he wants a seat at the table," Tarian speaks. "Because his daughter is with you,"—Tarian looks at Etienne—"he believes he should be one of the Crowns of Tynewood."

"No," Ares speaks up before anyone else can answer. "That's not going to happen,

not while Philipe and I are sitting at the table. Four Crowns at a time, he should know that.”

Tarian’s gaze flits over all of us; there’s conviction in his expression, and I know he’s already made a deal. He hasn’t consulted the rest of the brothers, and they’re going to be pissed.

“Doesn’t matter, what’s done is done,” he tells us, pulling out a packet of cigarettes; he flicks one out and lights it with his silver lighter. “I couldn’t wait for permission to do shit; I spoke with Thane, and he’s agreed to be a good boy if we allow him up.”

“What don’t you understand by four?” Ares’s tone is filled with frustration. “There aren’t any—”

“Four, I step down, Thane steps up, it’s as easy as that,” Tarian shrugs, his blue eyes landing on each of us for a moment before he pushes off the sofa. The cigarette that’s slowly edging away is pressed between his full lips. “I’m done with the bullshit. My uncle wants the damn Sovereign; he can have it.”

“You do know once you’re inked you can never leave?” Etienne reminds him of the vow, the promise they make to each other.

“I’m walking out, Etienne, there’s nothing either of you can say or do to make me change my mind. The longer I stay, the more my uncle is going to fight us.”

“Then we fight together.” The insistence in Etienne’s tone is clear that he’s hurt. Ares sits quietly, watching the scene unfold, as if he’s not perturbed by his best friend’s admission. Even though we are only friends, it feels more like a family, and if one of your own walks out, it’s not easy. Ever.

“We tried that, man,” Tarian shakes his head. His mind is made up. Blue eyes land on

me, and he watches me for a moment. “You need time with him, to learn who he is. Because even though he may want to make up for lost time, he can’t. I doubt he’ll ever be able to convince you that he’s a good man.”

“I don’t believe he is.” I nod, affirming what I learned about Thane Calvert when I was in his presence. He may have let me go, but the hold he has on us is far tighter than we ever imagined.

“I’m heading out,” Tarian says, waving his hand when the guys get up. “No goodbyes, I’m just taking a time out.”

“What does that even mean?”

“I need to think.” He offers us a mock salute and turns toward the exit. We watch him saunter away from the living room. None of the guys follow, but I’m frustrated that he’s giving everything up. Pushing off the sofa, I race to the door to catch him before he slips into the driver’s seat of his SUV.

“Don’t go. They need you,” I plead with him as he shuts the car door before making his way over to me. He’s close; I can smell the smoke on his leather jacket.

“Listen to me,” he smiles, there’s a gentle affection in his tone, something I never expected from him. He may have been friendly when Dahlia and I first arrived, but I never thought he’d care. “You need to spend time here, build yourself into the family.”

“What about you? You’re their brother.”

“Our bond is stronger than blood, life, or death,” he tells me, earnestly, and something in the way he says death has my heart catapulting wildly in my chest. “I’ll be back, whether it be tomorrow, next week, or even years from now. And I know

one thing for sure, when I do return, they'll still be here waiting for me."

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Tears fill my eyes, pricking against my lids, begging to be let loose, and I can't hold them in because they're heavy with emotion. I blink, allowing one to fall.

"No, don't be sad. Please. This is how it's meant to be." Tarian winks cockily, before he presses a kiss to my forehead and makes his way to his car. Once inside, he pulls away, and I watch him disappear down the driveway. And as the car vanishes from sight, I feel the pain in my chest.

It's so acute, as if he were my brother. It's as if my heart is breaking, but not only for Tarian, but for my man and Ares. And I know if I'm so torn by him leaving, I wonder just how Etienne and Ares feel.

Turning around, I walk back into the house to find Grecia has joined the conversation. She's beautiful, with chestnut waves that hang down to the middle of her back, and her almost luminous hazel eyes which have hints of green.

Her softly tanned skin glows, as if she's emitting sunlight. She looks up at me and smiles when I enter the room and settle beside Etienne, who pulls me into his arms.

"We need to figure out why Thane wants to be at the table," Ares says. "I don't feel comfortable with him knowing our plans to take down the assholes who run the various factions."

"He's never going to slip up. He's had years to perfect his lies, and I doubt the two of us are going to get to the bottom of it." Etienne's voice is filled with frustration, and I can imagine having one of his best friends walk out is going to take its toll.

Ares is about to respond when the buzzer echoes through the living room. He glances at Dahlia, before rising and heading to answer the intercom. A man's deep voice comes from the speaker, and I recognize it as Isaac Durand, Etienne's father.

I met him briefly when we were in London, and I have a feeling he's going to be shocked to see me here.

"Do you think I should wait in the bedroom?" I whisper at Etienne who glances at me and shakes his head in answer. "I just don't want—"

"You're here, part of us now, if he can't accept it, then he can walk back out and leave." I can't help but smile at the possessive nature of the man beside me. His arm, draped around my shoulders, warms me.

Just then, his father saunters inside with a young woman following close behind. I don't know who she is, but the moment Etienne sees her, his body stiffens. She looks very young compared to his father, and I wonder if it's his assistant, or if there's more to the story.

"Etienne," Isaac greets his son with a cool familiarity. "And this must be Dahlia," his voice heightens as he regards my best friend. He hasn't even acknowledged me yet, and I'm sitting right next to Etienne.

"Mr. Durand," Dahlia shakes his hand, offering him a smile, but I can tell from her schooled expression she's weighing him up. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"And you, the first woman to step up to the table," he tells her. There's a hint of admiration in his tone, but also, shock.

"We're in the twenty-first century. I think age old traditions should be able to keep up with that. Women are just as strong as men, perhaps even more so." I'm proud of the

woman my best friend has become; she's grown up from the shy girl I met in junior high school.

"Touché, Ms. Milton," Isaac grins.

"But now it's time for me to talk to the boys," he utters. "Ares, Etienne," he glances around, probably noticing that Tarian isn't here. "Where's Calvert?"

"We need to talk," Etienne tells his father, before pressing a kiss to my cheek and rising from the sofa. "I'll be back soon."

"Okay, seems like I'm missing quite a lot. Darling, would you mind staying here with the ladies while I sort this out." Isaac smiles at the woman who's clearly not only his employee, but something more from the look he offers.

"Sure. It's nice to see you again, Etienne," she speaks to him, but I notice him ignoring her, walking out of the living room without so much as a backward glance. Clearly, there are still things that he needs to tell me, things I'm not sure I want to know.

22

Etienne

The office is stifling as Dad walks in as if he owns it. I settle on the wingback chair opposite Ares's desk, and my father settles in beside me. Ares takes the lead, leaning on the desk with his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Tarian's left." Two words, and I feel it like a punch in the gut. "He made a deal with Thane to step down in order for this asshole to sit at our table." Ares is livid; his expression is thunderous, and when I look over at Dad, I notice he's in shock at the

revelation.

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“And you didn’t stop Tarian?” Isaac arches a brow at Ares, and I can’t help but chuckle at his question.

“Do you really think we let him walk out? Thane isn’t a man to fuck over; he has connections I’d rather not be on the wrong side of.”

Dad looks at me. “I know exactly what Thanatos Calvert has,” he informs me confidently. That’s one thing about my father: he believes the world should bow down to him, and I don’t.

“Well, then you should be able to sort this shit out because I want Tarian back here.” Rising from the chair, I pace beside the window, unsure of how to fix what this asshole has decided to break apart.

“I’ll get it sorted out, but what I need to know is how far you’re willing to go to get Thane out of Tynewood.” Dad’s voice chills me right down to the bone. I don’t doubt my father has some dangerous liaisons, and this time, I think he’s about to pull them all out of the hat in order to help us.

“As far as possible. Thane doesn’t deserve to be at the table.”

“And Dahlia does? Will you be adding your little girlfriend to the Sovereign as well?” Dad challenges me, turning my frustration into anger.

“You have no reason to question what we do. We’re the Tynewood faction, and if we decide on something, it rolls out to every other society, you know this. And we have decided that women should be able to sit at the table. There are four seats for the

sons; there should be four for the daughters.”

He chuckles, shaking his head at my insistence, which only serves to frustrate me further. “This isn’t a joke. This is a decision that’s going to stand until I take my last breath. And Rukaiya should sit at that table. Thane Calvert is her father.”

“What?”

“Her mother had an affair with that asshole, but he couldn’t step up as a father. Sound familiar?” I arch a brow, the attack is clear when my father winces at my insinuation, but I don’t feel guilty. He walked out, just like Thane, and he needs to know that it’s fucked up.

“I did leave, but I always loved you.”

“Yeah? Did you love me when I was alone here with a mother who would rather drink herself into oblivion before midday? Or were you here when mother would prefer my best friends over spending time with me?”

“Is this meeting meant to be about the Sovereign, or about how you’re bitter about me being an absent father?” Isaac rises, closing the distance between us. “Because if that’s the problem, you should know I didn’t have a choice. I had to leave, or your mother would’ve taken you away.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Should I leave?” Ares questions, watching us both as old secrets come to light, and I know my father’s about to impart more about my mother than I ever knew.

“No,” Dad says. “Stay, listen to this, because you’re one of the boys my wife was so enamored with.” He glances between Ares and I for a moment before he sighs.

“When I first met Hilary, we were friends with Abner, Thane, and Yasmine. It was a partnership that would always be there, or so we thought. In stepped Fergus who knew both Thane and Yasmine, and we welcomed him. Patrick, Dahlia’s father, was one of Abner’s original recruits because he grew up in Tynewood.”

There’s a pause, and I wonder if this is going to turn into some sordid, creepy family shit that only comes from rumors being spread about a small town.

“The problem is that Abner wanted the top spot, which he took without so much as a vote. When Patrick and Fergus stepped up to follow him, Thane got angry. I wanted to support whatever the Sovereign wanted, but your mother... I didn’t realize at the time... was working alongside Abner. More closely than I had ever imagined.”

“Are you saying that mother and Abner Lancaster were fucking?” My incredulous tone is evident as I regard my father. This is a fucking joke if that’s what he’s talking about. My mother may be many things, but someone who sleeps around, I don’t believe it.

“She had a very short, illicit affair with Abner.” Dad admits, and the pain in his voice makes my chest tighten in confusion and anger.

“That’s ridiculous. I would’ve known.”

He chuckles at my retort, and I realize that I would never have known. This was before I was born. “She wasn’t always the socialite you grew up knowing, Etienne,” he tells me. “When she had you, she believed you’d be just like her, a lover of many. Hence the reason she wanted to name you Eros, which I made her change.”

“So, I’m meant to be some sort of mini part of her?” I stop to stare at my father. “Do you know about Yasmine and me fucking?”

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He nods. “I didn’t when it happened, but she came to me a few years ago. She told me that she’d made a grave mistake. She thought you were in love with her,” he utters, and a gasp comes from the doorway. My gaze lands on Rukaiya who’s clearly overheard the whole conversation.

She turns and races from the door, and I don’t bother responding to my father. Instead, I follow my little wolf all the way to the bedroom we slept in earlier. When I reach the door, she slams it in my face with a loud thud.

“Little wolf,” I call through the thick wooden door, knowing full well she can hear me. The silence that greets me is stifling. “Listen to me, we need to sit down and talk. There are so many things that I need to tell you, and I’d rather you hear them from me.”

When she doesn’t answer, I lean against the door, my back flush with the wood, and I wait. Sliding down to my ass, I settle down for as long as it takes for her to open this fucking door and listen to me. This is ridiculous. She can’t be angry for what I did in the past, even though it was pretty shitty.

“I never knew what I was doing,” I sigh. “Well, I take that back, I was a stupid, horny sixteen-year-old boy who wanted to get his rocks off. And I guess it was my mistake. I thought I was cool at the time. I was with an older woman. The stupidity of a sixteen-year-old. Right?”

Another bout of silence is my only response. I lean my head back and close my eyes, my legs stretched out in front of me as I smile up at the ceiling. I knew it was going to be more difficult for her to accept than it was for Tarian. He’s grown up knowing

what a fuck up I am.

“You know, over the past year or so, I thought I would never need to sit down with someone and tell them why I am like I am. But within the few days that have passed, I’ve had to explain myself to one of my best friends. Tarian was so angry with me that I wasn’t sure we’d ever get back to the point of talking. And I don’t think he’ll ever forgive me for what I did.”

“Why?” Her voice comes through to me like a beacon in the night. That’s exactly what she’s been. I’ve merely been going through the motions over the past few years, wandering about, fucking anything that looked at me the right way. But when I met her a year ago, I couldn’t stop thinking about the blonde beauty with the tattoos and piercings. She’s not like any other girl in Tynewood, or any girl I’ve been with before, or any girl who’s thrown themselves at me.

“Think about it, if that was your mother, or father, who Dahlia had been with... How would it make you feel?” I pull out the joint I rolled this morning, holding it between my index and thumb. I want to light it, but I also need to keep a clear head if she opens this door. I have a feeling it may be my last opportunity to set the record straight.

Music suddenly drifts up the staircase to the second floor where I’m seated, and I can’t help chuckling at Ares’s choice of music at a time like this. ‘Demons’ by Jacob Lee streams up to us and fills the silent halls with a deep, haunting melody.

“I guess it sucks,” Rukaiya speaks through the doorway, her voice is calming to my otherwise tense muscles. “I just... I never needed anyone before. And you scare me,” she admits, and I’m on my feet, leaning my forehead on the door, and my palms flat against the cool wooden surface.

“How do I scare you, little wolf?” My voice is husky, and my body is needy for her,

but it's my chest that aches, it's my heart that reminds me I'm falling for her. Perhaps I already have, and I just won't admit it to myself.

"I don't believe in fairytales," she tells me. "I don't believe in good men or saviors." I have to agree with her there, but I don't speak, I wait for her to voice her concerns before I say anything. "And then there's you, Etienne." I want to respond when she sighs, but I force myself to listen. "You barged into my life and you've turned me into a stupid teenage girl with a crush. Which means that I'm reckless enough to think that you could be mine. I mean... it feels like when you aren't here—or when I was at Thane's house—it's as if I'm lost."

"And that scares you?" Now I'm slightly confused because she's not making sense at all. I thought I made it clear I wanted her, that she was mine, is mine.

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“No. What scares me is that I wanted you. I needed you there, not because I wanted you to save me, but because I just wanted you beside me.” She sounds so scared, so unsure of what her feelings might mean that all I want to do is hold her.

I open my mouth to respond, to give her the answer she needs, but I can't find words. My chest aches at her confession. I'm not sure why I'm so attracted to her, why my need to save her is so fierce, but it's there.

I can't deny it.

I can't control it.

But each time I have ever looked into her eyes, and seen her conviction, I always recognize her ferocity in those mere glances she gifts me. Her words though, they hit me right in the very heart of who I am. The same place I vowed never to let someone in, I realize I've already allowed her to enter.

I'm no hero, and I'm certainly not some knight in shining armor. I'm her equal, but what she doesn't realize is she's the one who controls us.

My little wolf is stronger than I am.

She twists the door handle, pulling it open and soon enough, I'm met with those gemlike eyes. They pierce me, stabbing me right in the stupid muscle that's already filled with her.

It's then that I find my answer. “And I want to be beside you. Not as some caveman,

but as the person who can stand beside you when you need it.”

“Are you finally admitting that I don’t need a hero?” She arches a brow at me as her lips curl into a naughty grin.

“I am. You’re far stronger than I gave you credit for.”

“And you’re far more stubborn than I thought you’d be.” Her words are soft, a whisper of amusement.

“Be mine. We don’t have to promise a forever if that’s not what you want,” I tell her. “But give me you, for now. Until we decide otherwise.”

She’s silent for so long, I drop my gaze to the floor, praying that she says yes. But the more I listen to the silence, the more my chest tightens because I half expect her to refuse. I almost hear her saying no but it’s in my mind. It’s the fear that seems to drive me as I wait for her to answer.

Lifting my head, I meet those eyes that see me for who I am, a broken boy trying to be a man. Then she gifts me her perfect smile and nods.

“Okay.”

23

Rukaiya

He’s silent for so long that I wonder if he heard me. Perhaps he’s not even listening. My heart is thudding against my ribs so painfully that I feel like I can’t breathe. Stress, it all comes down to the worry that he’s going to tell me he’s done fighting for me.

It's stupid. I've always said Dahlia was silly for having these fairytale dreams, but here I am, wanting someone to care for me the way Ares does for her. That's what I want. A relationship that's open and true. Hearing that Etienne was sleeping with Tarian's mother shocked me, but I understand that it was before I even knew him, and I'm acting like a teenage girl with a crush.

But then again, that's exactly what I am.

When I twisted the doorknob, and pulled open the door, I found Etienne standing there looking broken, tortured, and hurt. I fall into his arms without thinking. When he wraps me in his warmth, the doubt that's been plaguing me constantly slowly melts away. And I realize it's not only a fantasy in my mind that I am his, it's real.

"This right here," he speaks, pressing a kiss to the top of my head, "this is where I'm meant to be." He sounds so earnest, so real and true, that I have to look him in the eye. "And I'd like to kiss you," he grins, "a lot. I don't give a shit if you argue with me, I'll make you see that you're special to me. That I'm not going anywhere."

"Then you better come inside," I tell him, lacing my fingers through his as I pull him into the room and shut the door behind him. "I think it's time you show me just what it is you've been thinking about all these months." I've never been so brazen with anyone, but Etienne seems to enjoy playing with the wolf that normally lies dormant inside me. As dangerous as it may be, I want to make him see just what he does to me.

"You're a predator, little wolf. I'm merely your prey tonight, your turn to claim me," he informs me in a low, husky whisper that has a direct link to my core. "Because when you're done, you better be sure, I'll be fucking you until you're nothing but a sweaty, sated woman in my bed." A tingle shoots through every nerve ending in my body, all the way between my legs, and I can't help squirming at his promise.

“So, I’m in control tonight?” I ask.

With a satisfied smirk on his lips, I watch as Etienne unbuttons his shirt, slowly and methodically. He’s taunting me because the moment the first three buttons are undone, he stops. The smooth, tanned flesh that teases me from the small V is more than I can take, and I reach for the material of his shirt. Fisting either side, I tug hard, with strength I didn’t realize I had.

Buttons burst in all directions, clinking against the wooden furniture—the vanity, the chair, even the bedroom door—an echo of need bursting around us.

“There’s my little wolf,” Etienne nods, allowing me to slip the shirt over his shoulders. The material whooshes to the floor, and soon, I’m met with the chiseled peaks and valleys of his toned torso.

He presses his finger along my nose, trailing from between my brows, down to the tip of my nose. The motion has me closing my eyes. A belt buckle clanks, and then the hiss of a zipper echoes around me.

It doesn’t take him long to touch my nose again, silently telling me to look now. The moment my eyes open, he’s no longer in front of me, but his warmth is coming from behind me. I feel every part of him wrapped around me, and I can’t help smiling. I don’t want to move, I want him to stay in this position for all of eternity, but I also want to kiss him, taste him.

I turn in his arms and glance up at Etienne’s dark eyes. There’s a lock of hair that’s lying across his forehead, and the shimmer of the light on the dark locks makes him

look even more formidable as he looms over me.

Even though he's friendly to everyone, and often has a mischievous smile, there's an underlying darkness that he hides.

"Are you going to kiss me?" I arch a brow in question, causing him to pull back and watch me for a moment before he pulls me closer and crashes his mouth to mine. His heat cocoons me, as his hands trail down over my hips, cupping my ass, eliciting a whimper from me when he squeezes.

"Keep making those sounds and I'll be the one eating you all night," he growls against my lips, and I tease him by flicking my tongue over his lips, earning myself another feral grunt.

"Oh? Is that a promise?" I purr in his ear, biting the lobe in order to taunt him, and it worked. The next second I'm in the air, being thrown onto the soft mattress. I bounce a couple of times before Etienne's body is shadowing mine. He leans over me, pressing me into the mattress. "I think you're the wolf here tonight."

He kisses my mouth, my cheeks, trailing down to my jawline and then my neck. He sucks the flesh hard, grazing his teeth over it, and I can't help but cry out as my hips lift toward his.

"My little wolf really is hungry," he taunts. Moving lower, he slips his hands under the tank top I'm wearing to find me braless. He doesn't waste time tweaking my nipples until they're hard and needy, and it's as if he knows my body better than I do, because seconds later, his mouth is on me.

He sucks each hardened bud into his mouth, teasing it with his teeth. My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer, needing him to make me forget. I want him to take away all the memories of what I've been through—life, family, and all the lies.

He moves down, pulling on my sweatpants and panties, and soon enough, they're on the floor with the rest of our clothes. Etienne taunts me by placing soft, butterfly kisses on my ankles.

Then he moves over my calves, peppering me with soft, warm breaths and alternating kisses. The heat of his movements and the desire that's twisting in my gut have me wet for him.

Now that there's no material separating us, I can't help but ache deep inside to be filled by him. But that's not in his plan, not right now anyway, because he's keeping his promise.

He moves to my center, between my thighs, where he slowly inhales my scent, which causes me to blush shyly. His nose lingers near me, close, but not close enough. I need contact of some sort, but Etienne knows this, and he uses it to his advantage.

His dark, hungry gaze lands on me, meeting my own lust-filled stare. "Are you ready, little wolf?"

I nod. I can't find words, so this will have to do, and he doesn't wait any longer. He closes his lips around me, sucking and licking. He pulls my clit between his lips grazing the nub with his teeth, eliciting a mewl from me as my back arches off the mattress.

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My hands reach for him, my fingers tug his hair, pulling at the strands, and I know I must be hurting him, but I can't stop myself. My thighs tremble as he slips a finger into me, slowly fucking me with it. A second digit joins the first, and he opens me up, just enough, for his tongue to dart into me, causing me to cry out his name over and over again.

"That's it, little wolf. Come all over me," he orders gruffly against my heated core, and another shudder races through me as he continues his ministrations, turning me inside out with merely his fingers and tongue.

When I can't move anymore, he finally rises, his eyes hooded with desire as he looks over me.

"A beautiful work of art," he tells me as he takes in every piece of ink I have. "Did Fergus ever get angry at you for doing this?"

Nodding, "with the first one, I was rebelling, and he locked me out of the house, telling me I wouldn't live under his roof with tattoos. I stayed with Dahlia for two weeks before he came looking for me." I've never told anyone this before, but I'm not afraid of confessing it to Etienne.

"Do they mean anything?" His fingertips linger on the ink as he questions me, and goose bumps rise on every inch of my skin at his tender touch.

"Some of them yeah, the roses were my mother's favorite flower. The swallows flying to freedom."

Etienne's gaze snaps to mine. "You wanted to run away."

I nod. "I wanted to run all these years, but I didn't. Thankfully I had Dahlia, she got me through some tough times. The rest of the ink I had drawn up to fill up my arm. Fergus ignored me. I think by then he'd given up trying to be a father."

"I'm sorry you had to endure a life like that," he tells me before he continues his tracing of my ink. "I'm going to learn every line, every word, and every pattern on your body." The promise steals the breath from my lungs. It feels as if I'm being pulled under, into the depths with him and the feeling overwhelms me.

"That's going to take a really long time," I lift my hips, feeling his hardness against the smooth material of his boxer briefs.

"It is," he chuckles, shoving the waistband of his underwear down to his thighs. I'm met with the delicious view of his thick, hard erection. The tip glistens, and I can't help but lick my lips. "You coming to have a taste, little wolf?" He quips, his dark brow arching, and I'm moving before he can say another word.

I lie on my stomach, my mouth inches from him, and I decide to taunt him just as he did me. Darting my tongue out, I tease the glistening head of his shaft, slowly wrapping my lips around it. I look up to meet his animalistic stare—dark and feral.

His head drops back, his fingers grip my ponytail, and he holds me steady. When he looks down at me again, it's as if a darkness has overtaken him, and his smirk is pure filth.

"That's what you were hungry for all night," he speaks, but his control over my movements doesn't allow me to respond in any way. His hips move back and forth, his cock thickens and throbs inside my mouth, and I know he's close. Just as I expect him to find his release, he pulls out and sits back; his breathing is ragged as he

watches me.

“Is that all you’ve got, Mr. Durand?” I taunt him, licking my lips. I know I’m only poking the beast, but right now, he looks so good I want him to devour me.

He doesn’t respond, he merely crawls over me, pushing me onto my back as he nestles between my thighs. I watch as he reaches in the nightstand, pulling out a foil packet. With dark eyes that never leave mine, he tears it open and lifts himself just high enough to sheath his erection before he’s back in place.

“It’s time for you to show all those assholes downstairs who you belong to.” I can’t respond because he slips into me, sliding deep inside, causing my back to arch, pushing my breasts against him as my nipples brush along his smooth chest. The movement sends electric currents shooting through every part of me, and my toes curl as pleasure takes hold.

I’ve never known anything like this. The pure adrenaline coursing through my veins as I feel him fuck me into the mattress. He’s not gentle, and he’s definitely not calm. All that restraint and control he’s held onto for as long as we’ve been in this emotional tug of war has finally been unleashed, and my body is taking the punishment.

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He doesn't stop, my fingers grip his shoulders, my nails dig into his skin, and I'm sure I'm scratching and drawing blood. Etienne hisses in my ear as the dark pleasure takes hold of him.

His hand moves to my breast, and he squeezes it, causing me to wince, but I feel myself clench around him, which, in turn, sends pure pleasure straight to my clit. His mouth latches onto my nipple; he bites down just as his hand moves to my neck, holding me down.

Emotion hits me like a freight train straight to the chest in that second, and my body convulses, and I cry out his name so loudly, I expect the damn windows to shatter. We keep moving, he keeps fucking me, and I hold on. My legs are wrapped around his waist, my heels digging into his taut ass.

"That's only the beginning," he murmurs in my ear, before pulling out of me. The condom is still empty. He hasn't come yet. Shit, I'm in for it now.

24

Etienne

I flip her over, tugging her hips toward me and moving her on all fours. I'm not sure what's taken over me, but I ache for her. I want to climb inside her, so I can always be a part of her. Her body is made for mine, every inch of me inside her feels like I've come home, and I never want to be anywhere else.

I slide back into her tight pussy. She clenches around me, tightening and pulsing.

She's so close to another orgasm, and I know I can only hold out for so long. I pull back, then slam back in, my fingers grip her hips so tight, I'm sure she'll be bruised tomorrow. But right now, I don't care, all I want is to mark her, to claim her as mine, so no other asshole comes near her.

"Please, Etienne, please," she pleads with me, knowing I'm taking her to heights she's probably never been. My body moves with wild abandon as I fuck her. I reach around, my fingers finding her clit, and I circle it, tugging it until she's whimpering my name. And I can't hold back my orgasm any longer.

My balls draw up, tightening with my impending orgasm, and I grunt out my release. My fingers dig into the smooth flesh of Rukaiya's hips, and I know I've just bruised her. We both still for a moment, and I wonder just how long the calm is going to be here before the storm hits. Everything we still have to figure out is just outside the door, but for right now, I lie back and pull her into my arms. Right now, all I want is to feel her calm and happy.

We can deal with the bullshit tomorrow.

A hand on my shoulder wakes me from a deep, dreamless sleep. My eyes snap open, and I find Ares staring down at me. He crooks his finger, and I glance beside me, noticing Rukaiya is still asleep.

I slowly slide from the bed. Ares notices I'm still naked and shakes his head with a smirk on his face, and all I can do is shrug. Grabbing my boxer briefs, I tug them up, before pulling on a pair of sweatpants.

The moment I shut the door behind us, leaving Rukaiya in bed, I ask him, "What's going on?"

"Thane is here," he murmurs. "He and your father have been.... debating," he tells

me, and I know it couldn't be a calm conversation.

"What's it about?"

"Isaac is refusing to let him sit at the table, and Thane has a contract that he had Tarian sign; apparently, our best friend has signed over his seat."

"What?" My voice booms through the hallway as we walk toward the staircase. "That's bullshit. Once you're Crowned and inked, you cannot give your seat to anyone else."

"I know that." Ares is annoyed, just like I am. I shouldn't go down there when I'm in this mood, but I can't help it. I'm vibrating with rage. I could easily hurt Thane right now. I wish I could.

It's against the rules to strike another member, another Sovereign, but that's one asshole who makes me not care about the goddamned rules.

"Hey," Ares's hand on my shoulder stills me before we reach the ground level. My gaze moves to his, meeting that cool, calm expression. "I know what you're thinking," he starts, and I believe him. "But there's no way we can come out of this with our Crowns if you do anything stupid."

I stare at him for a long while, watching him as I take in the friend who I've known all my life. He's right, and I should agree, but it's difficult for me to admit that I've been wrong. Not just now, but even growing up I was a stubborn little asshole. I could never admit when I'd made a mistake.

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“I know, and I’m not going to do anything to jeopardize our brotherhood,” I tell him. “It’s something that means more to me right now than revenge. Shit happens, I know that, and Tarian may have walked out of this house, but he’s never out of our lives. Even though he may think we’re done,” I tell Ares sternly, “he’s delusional because we can never let one of our own walk out.”

“Exactly, so stop thinking of revenge. We have better things to do,” he mutters, as if he read my mind only moments ago. “Let’s go tell those assholes just who runs this fucking town.” Ever the alpha. He’s always been a leader; even when we were younger, there was nothing that Ares couldn’t control, but he never looked down on Tarian and I ever, he looked at us as equals. Like we were all on the same level, even though I think, for the most part, we’re all on different ranks, but at the same height. Ares is second in command after Philipe, and Tarian and I are both at third. Due to the way the Elders of the society are chosen, if anything happens to Ares or Philipe, it would be up to both Tarian and I to take the helm.

“Sounds good,” I smirk, following my best friend down to the office where I know my father and Thane are having their discussion. The moment we enter, they both turn to look at us.

“Son.”

“Listen to me and listen well.” My focus is on Thane. He’s watching me with a satisfied smirk on his face because he knows he’s gotten under our skin. Ares and I aren’t going to stand by and watch him break apart the Tynewood faction. “I don’t give a shit who you are, you’re not a Crown, and you never will be. You’re merely the brother of one of our Elder Crowns, so if you think that Tarian will ever be able to

leave you in charge, you're wrong."

"I have a contract." Thane hands me the folder, which I take and move around the desk. Finding Ares's lighter hidden in one of the desk drawers, I pull it out and flick the flame. Once it's dancing in the early morning light, I hold it to the folder.

"This is what I think about your contract."

"Etienne, no," Dad says, but it's too late, the pages ignite, the flames dancing wildly, and I know I've made my point when Thane's face drains of color.

"Now, if you have anything else to discuss, we can talk. But right now, I would recommend you leave here, find Tarian and inform him that your utterly ridiculous notion to take his place is no longer valid."

"This isn't over," Thane promises. "My nephew knows better than to fight me on his place. I was the rightful—"

"You were nothing," I bite out in frustration. "Just because you were fucking Yasmine doesn't mean shit."

"Are you sure about that?" Thane challenges, his voice confident, sending an icy shiver down my spine. "Because there's a lot more to all this shit than a few old men playing God." I wouldn't put it past Thane to hide more secrets until he's ready to reveal them. But only when it suits him. And if there are more, we'll have to deal with more bombs being dropped. There might be one that could shake the foundation of the Sovereign.

“Is there something you’d like to tell us then?”

Thane grins manically. He doesn’t speak, doesn’t offer up anything more, and I wonder just what the hell he’s hiding. Rage simmers through me as I watch him. If it were up to me, I’d knock him the fuck out, and when he’s down on the floor, I’d probably end up killing him.

“Tarian will meet my demands because he wants to see his mother again,” Thane tells us.

“Oh?” My brow arches with curiosity because I doubt Tarian wants anything to do with her, but I play his game. “And you’re keeping that over his head like a fucking prize for your seat at the table. His mother is a—”

“Watch your mouth, Durand,” Thane sneers. “She’s a woman who had to leave because of the shitty rules that your fucking Sovereign had laid out before her. Not because she didn’t love her son.”

“What the hell are you talking about? She made her son believe she died!” My voice peaks and rage vibrates through every inch of me. I feel every word, every syllable because I’m no longer cool, calm, or fucking collected. “How do you think he feels knowing the bitch walked out on him? She made him believe she’s dead, and then suddenly comes back into his life and wants a relationship with him.”

“That’s not what I want,” Yasmine’s voice shudders through me. Memories of my younger years suddenly at the forefront of my mind. And when I turn to regard her, I can’t help but recall every moment I spent with her.

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The stupidity of a young boy, and the seduction of a woman who was barely old enough to have a son. She was a young mother. I remember how beautiful she was when she got all dolled up for parties at either our house or the Lancaster's mansion.

But even now, as I look at her, I realize that my feelings have turned ugly. I hate her for what she did to me, but I can so easily kill her for what she did to my best friend.

"And what is it you'd like?" Ares questions her, folding his arms in front of his chest, making him look formidable.

"I just..." she shakes her head, walking into the room. She's dressed in a sleek black pants suit. Her blouse is a soft pink, and her dark hair hangs down her back in a straight plait.

"You have no right to be here," I tell her, recognizing the wince that creases her face at my words. But I don't give a shit, she needs to know that she's not welcome, and she never will be because this is our town. She chose to leave.

"I know I don't, and I'll happily leave again, but I need to see my son."

"Your son? You're suddenly so worried about him? After you left him to fend for himself?" My voice is barely audible as anger takes hold of my throat, squeezing it tightly, and I'm tempted to show her just how it feels. Her delicate neck would snap in my hand so easily.

Her gaze meets mine, deep blue, endless pools of emotion pierce me. "I didn't have a choice."

“Everybody has a choice,” Ares tells her, the exact words I was about to bite out.

She nods, a solemn gesture, which I’m sure is just her playing into the hands of everyone in this room. I’ve seen her when she’s lying; I could sniff it out a mile away because I grew up with a mother who did the same. It’s as if they enjoyed toying with people, using other people’s sadness to their advantage. I’m not stupid. This is a ploy to get us to feel sorry for her, but it’s not going to work.

“I love my son,” she mutters, a soft whisper of pained lies.

“And yet you left him,” I remark. “You’re welcome to walk out now, because Tarian is no longer in need of a mother who didn’t want him. He has a family, here, with us.”

“Watch your tone, Durand,” Thane speaks from behind me, and all the while, my father sits watching the show. He’s as bad as Yasmine, leaving me to enjoy his time with a woman young enough to be his daughter.

“I’ll watch my tone the moment you and Yasmine walk out of our lives.” I’m vibrating rage. It’s a poison racing through me as I stalk toward the woman who took my innocence.

“What happened to you?” she questions, her tone sad and filled with something... guilt? No. Why would she feel guilty?

When she pins me with her blue eyes, I feel the ache in my chest. That feeling of how much I wanted to matter to someone. She gave me the sense of freedom, she offered me the affection I never got at home. And she made me feel like I was needed. And I let her do it.

But right now, there’s only one woman I want to make me feel that way, and she’s

still asleep. I want to tell her how I feel, but fear has held me back. It's been so long since I found someone who made my heart and mind twist with anticipation when I wasn't around them.

The corner of my mouth lifts up, and I pin Yasmine with a glare that I'm certain will tell her all I want to say, without uttering a word. But I want to answer her, so I lean in, my mouth at her ear, and I notice how she shudders.

“You happened to me. You took a young boy, who needed the love of a mother, of a father, and you used it for your sick needs. And when you were done, you left me with emotions that were torn and frayed. You made me believe I was in fucking love with you.”

“I didn't mean—”

“Like fuck you didn't mean. You were an adult; you knew what you were doing, and even though it was wrong, you did it anyway. You make me sick, you're a vile, disgusting whore.”

Without waiting for a response, I stalk from the living room, needing to calm the fuck down. I can't be near anyone right now. I want to be with Rukaiya, but I know if I do, I'll hurt her by fucking her until she's broken. Not because I want to, but I can't think of anything other than tearing Yasmine's heart out and pulling it from her chest.

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My fingers tangle in my hair and I tug at the strands, reveling in the bite of pain as my skull prickles. I stumble up the stairs with memories haunting every moment of my journey until I stop outside the bedroom where I know my girl is still asleep.

My hands are still shaking, my knees feel as if they want to give out. Slamming one hand against the wall, I push against it, trying to hold myself up and break through the cool wallpaper. Staring at the pattern on the paper, I focus, breathing deeply in an attempt to calm the fuck down because the wall looks good enough to punch through.

I want to be near Rukaiya right now. I want to hold her, to tell her we'll be okay, but I don't open the door beside me. Instead, I stare at the door willing it to stay closed because I can't go in there looking like a crazed person.

She's come to mean everything to me and that is something I can no longer deny. I know that relationships aren't always forever, I've seen it happen with my own eyes, my own family torn apart by stupidity and hunger for something else. But I hope that Rukaiya and I will last.

It reminds me of the moment I knew my parents were never going to work. The night that I finally realized my family was falling apart, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was too young to beg them to stay together, and I learned that unhappiness in a marriage can lead to more volatile emotions.

I'm broken. I knew it the moment I turned seventeen and looked back on my life, on the people who were meant to be role models. They're all fucked up, my family most of all. And now, I'm just like them. I vowed never to love because I didn't want to be like my father, and I didn't want the person I loved to turn out like my mother.

The fear of turning into my parents has made me stay away from relationships all this time. At twenty-one I should be happy to find a girl, to be with someone. But how am I meant to do that when my own upbringing was so fucked up?

Closing my eyes, I lean my head against the door and allow my mind to take me back to the night my parents finally taught me how savage emotions can be.

The house is quiet, but I know Dad is on his way home, and the moment he steps through the door, he'll see mom passed out on the sofa. She's been there all day. When I got home from school, the maid told me she'd been out with friends for breakfast. When she got home, she fell onto the cushions and swung her arm along the table in an attempt to find her wine glass, which wasn't there. She ended up taking out a vase of flowers, making them fall onto the cold Italian marble tiles.

It's not the first time my mother has been drunk before lunch. It's also not the first time my mother has taken everything in our home and made it nothing but a prop for her drunken escapades.

Sighing, I push into my bedroom and flop onto my bed, staring at the pressed ceiling. I focus on the pattern and count the lines that form geometric shapes in the paint. I no longer have stars pinned to the ceiling. When I was younger, I used to have glow in the dark stickers that I put up there, but Dad had them removed the moment I turned twelve. He told me I wasn't a child anymore.

How I wish I was.

Life would be so much easier.

The door swooshes open, the clicking of the lock reverberates in the eerily quiet mansion, and then I hear him make his way through the house until he reaches the living room. My ears prick, and even though I'm completely focused on anything

other than my own breathing, I don't hear a sound.

I push off my bed and make my way back to the bedroom door and quietly twist the knob, pulling it open and stepping out onto the soft carpet that covers the wooden floors. I wait a moment before I pad over the paisley pattern and stop at the top of the steps.

From here, I can see Dad hovering over my mother. His hand on the back of the sofa as he holds himself up. He doesn't touch her, but the sneer of disgust on his face is evidence that he's not happy.

"You sicken me," he murmurs at her sleeping face. His hand trails up her body toward her throat. And I watch as he squeezes. "I could end you. I can be free, but you know what? I'm not a monster." Dad's voice is cold, as if he'd flicked a switch and he's no longer the man who gives me smiles and tells me he's proud of me.

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I half expect him to spit in mom's face. But her eyes flutter and they open. Her mouth forms an O when she sees him, but it's a silent scream.

"Isaac?" Her voice cracks as he squeezes his fingers, and mom reaches up to claw at his hands. "What are you doing?"

"I wanted to see how easy it would be to get you out of mine and Etienne's life." He grins manically and I'm frozen in shock. I've never seen him like this before.

"Who is she?" Mom questions coldly. "Who is the whore you're fucking?"

Dad laughs out loud, the sound reverberating through the living room. "Why? Do you want to suck my cock and taste her cunt on me? She's far better in bed than you ever were."

"Fuck you, Isaac. I never once cheated on you."

"But you did..." Dad shoves off the sofa and rises, straightening his jacket. "You've been having an affair with alcohol since after Etienne was born. Don't tell me you still love me."

"Love is a figment of everyone's imagination," Mother hisses angrily. "You never loved me, Isaac, you loved the idea of having a perfect family."

"There is no such thing as perfect." Dad's angry tone lowers. "Love is nothing more than a farce, and you, were nothing more than a means to an end. Luckily your son won't grow up like you."

“What do you mean?”

“I’m moving to London, where I can be happy. And I’m taking Etienne with me.” Dad’s threat makes me shiver. I don’t want to leave my friends. I like being in Tynewood. Granted, I don’t like living with mom most of the time, but I can get over it if Ares and Tarian are here.

“Over my dead body.”

“Don’t make wishes you know I’m able to grant you.” Dad saunters off and leaves mom on the sofa and I race back to my room before either of them catch me. The pain in my chest is getting worse, and I know I’ll never tell someone I love them because I’ll only turn out like mom and dad.

And that’s something I never want to do.

26

Rukaiya

The bed dips behind me. I’ve been awake for almost thirty minutes, and as much as I wanted to go downstairs, the moment I opened the door, I heard the raised voices. Arguing always takes me back to a time that I’d rather not remember. A time when, who I believed, was my father and my mother would spend their nights having heated conversations.

“I know you’re awake,” Etienne murmurs in my ear, sending a cool shiver down my spine. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you woke up.”

I roll over to regard him. His eyes are filled with pain, and I want to take it away. I want to hold him and make him not hurt anymore. He reaches for my face, grazing

his knuckles against my cheek.

“You’re beautiful,” he tells me, and there’s no snark in his voice. He means it. Honesty that’s so brutal and real steals my breath.

“Where did you go?”

“Thane and Yasmine were here,” he responds. “We had a bit of an argument. I walked out after a while, or I would’ve done something...”

“You would’ve hurt Tarian’s mother?” My voice is low, but I’m sure he can hear the shock that laces my words.

“Without a doubt,” he responds with ease. I don’t know why, but when I look at Etienne, I don’t see the violent person he appears to be. Yes, there’s always a danger that someone can turn violent, depending on a situation, or an event, but he always seems to be the calm one.

“I have to tell you something,” I start, unsure of what his reaction would be, but I know he needs to hear this. “I saw your mother with Yasmine. They were talking as if they were the best of friends.”

Etienne’s expression doesn’t change, but his eyes shimmer with barely controlled rage. “Then they both need to pay for their sins.”

“You would hurt Hilary?”

“I’m loyal to a fault,” he admits. “If someone hurts people I care about, I don’t take it lightly.” And there it is, the proof that he may want to do something stupid, but it’s not because he enjoys it, it’s just his way. Loving someone so deeply that you’re willing to do anything for them, that’s what real family is meant to be like. I see that

now, being in Tynewood, around the guys and Dahlia, I know I want that.

“I respect that,” I nod, offering him a smile. “But you shouldn’t do it out of anger, hurting someone, killing them even, it’s not worth it. Revenge may be sweet, but it comes with a bitter aftertaste.”

The corner of his mouth kicks up, giving me the view of his handsome face while he’s grinning. I recall the amount of times I would watch him when I first got to Tynewood, eager to see that specific smile. Even when I was sitting beside Dahlia or chatting with Tarian, it was always Etienne who captured my attention.

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“What?” he questions, and I realize I’d been staring at him for a long while.

Scooting up in bed, I tug the sheet along with me, but he’s having none of that. His hand grips the material, pulling it down, so my chest is bare to him. A low growl reverberates through him, and I have to squeeze my thighs together to calm the ache that’s so apparent when he’s near me.

“You’re a lover not a fighter,” I remark, as he leans in to press soft kisses to my neck, making his way down to my collarbone, my shoulder, and then to my now hardened nipple. Etienne sucks the bud into his mouth, taunting and teasing me, until I’m squirming on the mattress.

“I’m a lover for one person only,” he murmurs against my wet flesh. His tongue darts out, flicking against my nipple, and within seconds, he’s above me, his body nestled between my thighs. “I want nothing more than for you to smile, to be happy, and I’ll be beside you until you’ve found that peace.”

“Why me?” I finally ask the question that’s been on my mind since the first day he flirted with me. “All this time, with everything that’s happened, you’re still here, even with my real father trying to break up the Sovereign by taking Tarian’s seat.”

He nods slowly. “Family doesn’t just mean blood, but the brotherhood I found with Ares and Tarian means more to me than anything. You came along and...” His words filter into the silence of the bedroom. I wonder, briefly, if he’s going to answer me, expecting him not to when he does. “You’re the unexpected beauty who I can’t get out of my fucking head.”

This time, I can't help but laugh. "Okay, and what about this morning? Is Thane still here?"

Etienne shrugs. "I left Ares to tell Thane to get out of his house, but he better be gone when I get down there."

"We should go together," I tell him confidently. "I want to be next to you through this." He nods, but doesn't say anything so I continue, "And I want to sit down and talk to your father."

"No."

"What? Why?"

He's off of me in the next moment, and I watch him move toward the window. Pushing off the bed, I follow him, sliding my arms around his waist. "Please, Etienne. This will mean a lot to me. If he can see how strong I am, how willing I am to tell him about Fergus, he'll respect me."

"He should fucking respect you without you giving him information, little wolf," Etienne growls, and I feel the vibration in his chest.

"I know, but not everyone will always do things your way or how you'd like them to do it." My reminder stills him.

Etienne turns in my arms, cups my face, and plants his lips on mine. A kiss so gentle and sweet, you wouldn't think I'm standing naked before him. When he breaks away, I stare into those dark eyes, ones that hold so many secrets, so many memories, and I want to climb inside and scoop them all out.

"Tell me who you are," I finally utter.

“Who I am?”

“Yes. I know you grew up with your mother, your father left, and you were alone. I can see the pain in your eyes,” I inform him gently, hoping I don’t anger him with my observation, but he doesn’t push me away or fight me.

“I was a child who didn’t know what love was,” he admits. “I went to seek it out and found Yasmine.” Even at the utterance of her name, I feel the agony slicing through my chest. “But she’s nothing to me. I was used.” His voice is even, his tone serious. “Nothing can change what happened in the past, but the future is wide open. It’s mine for the taking.”

Tipping my head to the side, I question, “And I’m in your future?”

Etienne stares at me, a small smile dances on his lips, making him look young and innocent, but I know that purity was lost long ago.

“When I was down there, right beside Yasmine, when I looked into her eyes and inhaled her perfume, I felt sick. It was as if I was finally seeing the darkness and didn’t want to run toward it anymore. Something clicked, and I knew what I had to do. You know what gave me the strength to tell her exactly how I feel?” He doesn’t wait for me to respond before he continues, “You.”

“Me?” I’m shocked, and my tone makes it clear.

Etienne nods. “You’re the only woman I need in my life. I may be a bit of an asshole, and there are times I’ll fuck up,” he chuckles as he says this, and I have to agree, nobody is perfect. Not even me. “But I’ll care for you for as long as you want me there. And even when you chase me off, I’ll still be there, lurking in the background.”

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“Sometimes you say the most romantic things, Mr. Durand.”

His hands trail down to my ass, and he lifts me up against him. Walking us to the bed, he stops when he reaches the edge. “They don’t call me the god of love for nothing, little wolf,” he whispers along my neck before he sucks the delicate flesh into his hot mouth, eliciting a whimper from my lips.

“Etienne!” Ares’s voice booms through the thick wooden door, and Etienne’s response is a frustrated growl.

“Put some clothes on,” he orders me, before going to the door and pulling it open just enough for him to stick his head out. “What the fuck are you cock blocking me for, man?”

“Tarian’s here. Rukaiya and you, downstairs now.” And with that, Ares is gone.

I’m almost dressed, slipping on my shoes, when Etienne turns to regard me.

“It’s a shame,” he tells me. “You look so much better naked, but for my eyes only.” He winks cockily before sliding an arm around my shoulders and leading me out of the bedroom and down the hallway to the staircase, where we can hear people gathered in the living room.

Nervous would be an understatement. I’m not used to being around so many people, even if it is the guys and Dahlia. But the moment we walk into the room, we find Isaac, along with his girlfriend, Thane, Yasmine, as well as Hilary.

This is going to be fun.

27

Etienne

“What’s going on?” I question, as Rukaiya and I make our way into the room. My hand locked with hers is noticeable, and I can read my mother’s expression turning sour the moment her eyes land on our joined hands.

“We need to talk about the contract that you so elegantly burned.” Mother speaks in her cold, standoffish tone, but it no longer bothers me like it used to. I always used to feel heartache when she was like this with me. No more. I’m grown up; I’m an adult, and I no longer have to see the disdain she has for me every day.

“There is no agreement, no contract.” I’m adamant in my words. “Tarian is not leaving the Sovereign. If Thane would like to run a faction of his own, that’s his prerogative, but this is the table that only allows four sons. Can you understand that, mother? Or would you like a glass of wine to assist you in listening to me?”

“Now, Etienne—”

I pin my father with a glare that shuts him up. “No, there is no longer a debate here. You’ve come here to help, but all you’re doing is making things worse. Why don’t you take your far too young for you girlfriend and go back to England?”

“That’s no way to talk to anyone in this room, Etienne.” Isaac’s voice is rigid, and I know he’s angry with me, but I don’t give a shit.

“We’ll leave you four to speak,” Ares suggests, pulling Dahlia along behind him. Thane and Yasmine offer us privacy, but Tarian doesn’t leave.

“Listen, man,” my best friend speaks finally. “This is what I need to do to find out who I am, or what I’m actually doing with this shitshow of a life.” He sounds dejected, pained, and I can’t stand to see the people I care about hurting. It’s who I am and I’m never going to change.

“I get that, and you can do all of that, but you’re not walking away from your seat.” I meet his stare, hoping he’ll agree with me. “This isn’t a game that you can walk away from because you’re tired of it, we’re here, you are family.”

“Yes, you are my family, and I’d like you to respect my wishes. I’m not leaving forever.” His earnest words make me feel more at ease. I understand that need to figure out what you’re doing in life, I wanted to run away so many times, I wanted to leave and never come back. At least Tarian’s promising to return.

“We can’t do this without you,” I tell him, and he grips my shoulder in solidarity before he nods and leaves me with my mother and father, and the young woman who dad has decided to bring along.

“What is she doing here?” Mother sneers, her gaze on Rukaiya, and I pull her into my side. It’s my response. My mother’s eyes widen as she regards us before they narrow. “She’s not taking a Crown. This is ridiculous. I never wanted you to be involved in all these childish games that the adults are playing.”

“Well, it’s a bit late for that. And the girl by my side is who I choose, Mother,” I tell her with confidence I never truly felt when I was around her. She has a big personality, one that takes over the room if you let it.

“She’s not—”

“Her father is Thanatos Calvert; he may not be an Elder, but he’s blood of the Sovereign. The same way Dahlia took her father’s seat at the table. Philipe, along

with the rest of us, have decided that it's a new era. And nothing you say or do will change that. You're nothing to the Sovereign. You've made it perfectly clear that it was something you never wanted to be a part of."

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“Are you listening to your son, Isaac?” My mother’s tone is filled with indignation at my father. They always blamed each other for everything that went wrong. I was one of the mistakes that they had to deal with. That is until my father walked out, leaving mommy dearest to look after me.

“He’s a grown man,” Dad says, his eyes on me, unwavering. “I may not have been the perfect father, and I may not have been the most present in his life, but looking at how much he’s grown and matured,” he smiles as he says this, “I’m proud of him. He’s able to stand up for what he believes in, and that’s all I ever wanted for him.”

The emotion in his voice, in his words, grips me hard, and I can’t find a response. For years, I hated him. I spent my time angry at him for walking out and leaving me. I hated the fact that he moved on and didn’t love my mother anymore, but I realize now, as he laces his fingers through Maisy’s, my father has chosen her; the same way I chose Rukaiya.

“This is ridiculous,” Hilary mutters.

“Is it, Mother? Or is it just something that doesn’t fit in with you and your elite friends down at the country club?” I challenge, waiting for her to deny it, because I’d like her to. I wish my mother would break down just once to show how much she cares, or even loves me, but the cold woman I grew up with doesn’t shatter.

“You will never enter that house again.” Her threat hangs in the air, but it’s Dad who steps forward and smiles.

“Actually, Hilary,” he starts. “The house is in my name. If you remember correctly,

the moment I signed the papers, you refused to legally change your last name to Durand even though you told all your friends you're a Durand." Isaac's tone is drenched in the satisfaction that's painted all over his expression. "And since you didn't take on the name, that makes you.... Nothing."

"What?" We all mutter in shock as my father turns to me.

"Etienne, I may not have been there for your teenage years or your college life, but I'm here now, and these," he pulls a set of keys from his pocket, the keyring that hangs from them is our Durand coat of arms. "are your keys to the kingdom. As a Crown of Tynewood, each of you have to keep your set of the keys safe. And one day," he smiles, looking over at Rukaiya, "when you have your son or daughter, you hand them down."

"I don't understand, I mean, don't you keep them?"

"No. I run the faction in London; it's no longer my duty to live in Tynewood. It's yours. I saved it, held onto it, for you until I knew you were ready. And I believe you're ready now. It's your land, Etienne, and now that it belongs to you, I know it's in safe hands."

My hand trembles as I reach for the keys. They're heavy, four silver keys. I know one is for the house, the other for the cottage that's located on our property, where our security lives, but there are two other keys I don't recognize.

Looking up at my father, I hold them between my thumb and forefinger, "What are these for?"

He points at the one that holds the crest of the Gilded Sovereign. "This is for the room where you meet. If you're there first, you're able to unlock it for the rest of the Crowns. And this one," he pulls the smallest silver key from my fingers. "is for the

church behind the Lancaster mansion. It's yours to use as you see fit," he tells me, and I know what he means. We've been going into that church since we were kids. Tarian, Ares, and I spent our days there, planning what we would do at school the next day, how we'd get out of detention, it was our sanctuary.

"Thank you," I manage to speak, after swallowing past the lump in my throat.

"Listen to me, Isaac," my mother pipes up from behind Dad. "You're not throwing me out of my own house. Do you understand me?" Her pointed finger is right in my father's face, but he doesn't move, he doesn't even wince at her spat out words. "I will make sure you regret this."

"There is nothing you can do, Hilary, it's in my will, in all the contracts you ever signed when we got married and when we got divorced. It was always going to be Etienne's."

"This isn't the end."

"Yes, it is, Hilary. I trust you'll be out of the kids' way when they return to the house tomorrow." My father's conviction, confidence gives me the same, because, I finally realize, even in his absence, I was the one person he never truly walked away from. It was her.

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“Guys, I don’t want to interrupt, but we found Fergus. The men are bringing him to the church, they’re flying out of Amsterdam right now.” Ares’s news only makes me more excited to be here, because that asshole is going to see his end. I’ll make sure of it.

28

Rukaiya

Etienne’s arm wraps around my center, pulling me against him. When Isaac and Maisy left, not long after Hilary stormed out, we came out to the garden. The fresh air is welcome, and I close my eyes, leaning my head against Etienne’s chest.

His erection nudges my butt, and a soft groan rumbles in his chest. I don’t move, I can’t breathe. He moves again, rolling his hips, so his hardness slides between the cheeks of my ass. Even through the thin material of my panties and yoga pants, I can feel him throb.

“You know that anyone could walk outside right now and find us like this,” I warn him, opening my eyes to see him staring down at me with a wicked grin on his face. “And I am so not into being watched.”

“I’m just happy that my father has given me the keys. I didn’t realize he’d been keeping them all this time. It means a lot to me, and I wanted to celebrate.”

“By fucking me in the garden?” I quip, playfully, turning in his arms, lacing my hands around the back of his neck.

Etienne's smile is everything. The happiness that sparkles in his dark eyes makes my heart soar. It's not only me that's put that emotion there; it's his family. Well, his father. I'm not sure his mother will ever truly leave us to be together in peace, but now that I know Isaac supports us, I feel less anxious about being here.

"Hey," Etienne says, breaking through my thoughts. "We're here, as a family. You're a part of us now, and soon, you'll have your ink as well. I do want you at the table with me, little wolf," he tells me. The honesty in his tone is calming to the racing heart that's beating against my ribs.

"I feel more at home here than I ever did anywhere else, but having your father's approval, it makes it more freeing. I know you told me that you're choosing me, and nobody else's opinion matters, but since I didn't really know my father, either of them, having Isaac consider me a part of your life means a lot."

Etienne must understand. And when he nods, I can't help but smile. "I know, and I'm sorry I didn't understand it before. I always focused on my friends, the two men inside, not on my family because it was so fucked up."

"You think your family is fucked up, have you heard about mine?" I tease, and it's the first time I can truly laugh about this. Because in my heart, I still hurt, wondering how Thane could've done what he did. Paying someone to be my father because he just didn't want to be a father.

"That's why I learned a long time ago that blood means nothing to me; it's the people who will be there when you least expect them to be who matter. Tarian and Ares have always been that for me. My support system."

"Then I'm thankful I'm here," I tell him, leaning up on my tiptoes to press my lips to his. The softness of his mouth molds to mine as the flavor of coffee still lingers on his tongue when he licks into me, and I revel in it. The warmth of his body against mine

envelops me.

“Can you two get a room?” Ares chuckles from behind us.

My cheeks heat in embarrassment at being caught once more. I know Ares doesn’t give a shit, but I do.

“Fuck you,” Etienne bites out in response, but he laughs it off when his best friend grins at us. “What the fuck do you want?”

“We have Fergus at the church,” he tells us both. “Get changed, things are going to get messy.” Ares pins me with a look. “You don’t have to come with us if you don’t want to.”

“I want to talk to him.”

“We’ll be doing some questioning before that, so if you’d like to stay with Dahlia, we’ll get you girls once we’re done.” Something tells me that the questioning is going to be violent and bloody, and I’d rather not be there to witness it.

“I’ll spend some time with Dahlia,” I tell him.

Ares nods, tugging Etienne along with him. “No more kissy face, we have shit to do. Meet me in the office, we have a couple of things to go over before we leave,” he tells the man who’s stolen my heart, my mind, and my body. Once they disappear down the hall, I turn to look out at the garden. It’s lush and beautiful, with the greenest grass. It’s so peaceful here, but I know there’s a storm coming. Fergus isn’t going to give up information easily, I’m sure of it, but then again, I don’t know how persuasive the guys are going to be.

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A shudder travels through me when I think about it. Blood and torture, those are things I'm definitely not familiar with, not at all. Fighting for what I want and need, that I can do.

I head into the house, reminding myself that my best friend is here, and we haven't had time to talk to each other. It feels like we haven't seen each other in years, when it's only been a few months.

"It's good to have you back." Tarian smiles at me as I pass him on his way out of the house.

"Thank you." My voice is small and shy; tears sting my eyes. I've always wanted a brother—Ares and Tarian are just that and so much more. My heart is full; it feels as if I've been through hell and made it out on the other side.

I find Dahlia in the kitchen. She's standing at the countertop, scrolling through her phone when I walk in. She leaves the device on the surface and leaps into my arms, knocking us both backward, and I'm mumbling in her long dark hair how much I missed her.

"I still can't believe you're here," she tells me, in a soft whisper, as she holds onto me. "I was so alone. I missed you so much." She sounds so happy, so at ease that we're here together once more.

"I've felt uneasy since I came back, but the past two days have been less stressful, even with the shit that's been going on. I mean, I just explained to Etienne, it's something I've always wanted, needed even—a family."

Her eyes turn glassy as she regards me. She knows who I am inside. I've hidden away behind the parties and makeup, but deep down, I was just like her—a shy girl who was thrown in at the deep end.

“Let's go get some wine and catch up.” Dahlia tugs me away from the countertop, and when I glance over my shoulder, I know that the boys are gone, but it's something I've always done—looked behind me in case someone was coming for me.

“Wow, this place is amazing,” I tell her, not remembering seeing most of the kitchen since I was last here. It's been refurbished, and it looks incredible.

“Ares let me go wild taking out some of the old furniture and cupboards.” I watch my best friend pop the cork on a bottle of sparkling wine, and I notice how bubbly she is. Dahlia is glowing, she looks happy, and it makes me smile.

“You and Ares are doing well then?” I question, remembering when I last saw my best friend and her boyfriend, they were at odds with each other.

Dahlia stops, looks up at me and grins, “We still have our moments, but I love him. He chose me over his father. He's given me a chance to bury my father, and I feel like I'm finally living my life.”

“It looks good on you. Love, I mean.”

She sets the glasses on the table, and I lift mine. The bubbly liquid is golden, and when I take a sip, the cold hits my jaw, making me wince. “That's dry,” I giggle, taking a longer swallow, slowly getting used to the flavor.

“It is, but it's so good.” Dahlia winks, lifting the bottle, topping off our flutes, before she holds hers in the air. “To us, to love, and to the future.”

I click to that because I'm tired of living in the past. The man I thought was my father is gone for good, and I can finally move on.

"So, are you going to tell me more about you and Etienne having wild sex?" My best friend waggles her brows.

"Oh my god, you're terrible."

"Hey, I'm the best friend, I need to know these things." She pouts, shrugging her shoulders, as if she's right and she needs all the dirty details, which only makes me laugh out loud.

"Fine." I roll my eyes for dramatic effect, but Dahlia doesn't relent. That's one thing about my best friend, she's adamant. "By the way, we kept our pact, best friends," I offer with a wink, before I dive into the details of Etienne and my first time together. It wasn't the magical, candle-lit night I thought it would be. Instead, it was raw and passionate. Filled with everything I didn't realize I needed.

"I can't believe you and Etienne." She sighs, sipping her champagne.

Just then, the boys join us, and I notice Ares is carrying a folder and the car keys. Etienne's arms wrap around me. "We're heading out now. I'll be back soon." He holds me tight as he asks, "When is Tar getting here?"

"In an hour or so, but he's going to be taking some time out after we interrogate Fergus. We can head to the church now." Ares's voice is tight with emotion, and I wonder if it has something to do with Thane. "I think he just needs to get his head straight. Learning your uncle is a ruthless criminal isn't easy."

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“I guess you would’ve been able to help him if he were to stay. I mean, learning about your Dad would be about the same as what he’s feeling right now,” I tell Ares, who may understand Tarian’s situation better than most.

“I think we all could. Our parents, who are meant to be role models, are the ones who fucked us up.” I nod, agreeing with Ares. “Perhaps the time away will give him clarity.”

We sit in silence for a while before the guys rise and leave Dahlia and me. I know everyone is worried. He’s one of the four, and he has to be here. He’s our family, and that means he is a part of us.

29

Etienne

“This place is a fucking sty, man,” I tell Ares, when we pull up to the church. It’s only hit three in the afternoon, and I wasn’t expecting them to get here so soon, but since Fergus is bound inside the church, we have to get the information we need from him as soon as possible.

“It’s a fucking shithole. We need to get it cleaned up,” Ares tells me, as Tarian and I follow him toward the building. It’s been a while since I was here. Months even.

When we enter the building, we find Fergus bound to one of the chairs. Legs apart, ankles tied, arms behind his back. The asshole has the balls to look smug as we walk in, and I near him.

“The little boys are trying to be all grown up,” he mutters. It takes a lot for me to control my anger. This man will not get mercy from me because, by hurting my girl, he fucked up big time. Nobody hurts my girl.

Rearing my fist back, I shove it forward with speed so fierce, he can't move out of the way soon enough. The feeling of bone hitting flesh is palpable, and the crunch of his nose beneath my knuckles sends exhilaration shooting through every inch of my body.

“Talk to any of us like that again, and it won't just be your fucking nose that's bleeding out.” I grin at him, and I realize I've completely lost all my restraint. I'm normally less violent, but when hate mingles with anger, I can't help myself.

“Just because you're fucking the girl doesn't make you a man, Durand,” Fergus chuckles. This time it's Ares who steps forward. Tarian's hands grip my shoulders, holding me back, because I could easily kill this fucker right here and now. And I wouldn't feel any guilt.

“Listen to me and listen really fucking good. I want names, and if you can't give me that, I want everything else that's stuck in your head—times, addresses, whatever you're hiding, because you're not leaving here until you tell us,” Ares speaks, leaning in to come eye-to-eye with the man in the chair.

But Fergus challenges, “What makes you think I'll tell you anything?”

“Because you like money, and I have a lot of it,” Ares counters, knowing what to say to persuade him. Silence hangs heavily in the air, and I wonder just how long it's going to take for Fergus Harrison to crack.

We wait. The silence is deafening.

“I’m not telling anybody anything until I have it in writing that I’ll be safe,” Fergus finally responds, causing Ares to laugh out loud. The sound bouncing off the walls of the empty, derelict church.

“You think you’re here to bargain?” I question. Staring at him, I can’t help but laugh. “This isn’t a debate. We’re not here for you to make a deal with us. What did Thane give you? What did he promise you?”

My muscles are tense, ready to punch him again and again, until there’s nothing left but a pile of blood and guts. My mind is awash with ways to make him talk, but something tells me that he’ll hold out for as long as he can. He’s strong; he’s been working for Abner for so long that I’m sure a bit of torture won’t bother him at all.

And I’ll gladly do it.

“Like I said, I want protection,” Fergus tells us, spitting the blood that’s dripping from his nose into his mouth. I revel in the fact that I did that. I want to do worse. Ares is normally the violent one; he loves fighting, but this time, I’m finding my need for vengeance bubbling over, and I want more.

“You want a contract?” Ares sneers. “I’ll give you one, and once you sign it, I want every piece of information from you. I don’t care who gets hurt, because if I have to, I’ll fucking lock you up in the darkness and leave you to rot. And my friends here,” Ares gestures behind him toward Tarian and I. “We won’t stop until you and all your friends who worked for my father are seen to. You seem to forget that I am Abner’s son, and everything he’s ever taught me will come to fruition. I’m not afraid of anything, and I will make you pay.”

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“All I want is to be safe when I walk out of here.”

“If you don’t tell us what we want to know, you won’t be walking out of here. You know what the church is to the Sovereign,” I tell him, and he nods slowly. “Then you’ll know that beneath this thick concrete floor are cells that will keep you safe, but there are things down there that will eat you alive.”

A smile graces my lips. It feels as if my blood is on fire, burning up just to see this asshole shit himself. I don’t want to play games anymore.

“I’ll go back and get the contract drawn up, and when I return, you’ll sign it, tell us everything, and then we’ll think about letting you go.”

Turning, I make my way out of the church, hoping being away from him will calm me the fuck down, because I’m ready to rip into him. A breeze picks up just as I make it to the gardens, which look like they’ve seen better days.

“Etienne,” Ares calls to me, causing me to glance over my shoulder. “I can do it if you want to stay?”

“No, I need to get away from that asshole. I also need to talk to Rukaiya. She wanted to come here and see him, and I wonder if it’s better for her to talk to him before I lay into him.”

A chuckle springs free from Ares, and he nods. “I get that. Do you think she should come here? Once he’s given us the information we need, I’m not sure I feel comfortable letting him go. I don’t trust him.”

“I don’t either,” I tell him. “But a contract is just that, an agreement.” He nods, and I wave a goodbye at him, before slipping into the driver’s seat of my car. Thankfully, I chose to follow him here. It’s not been that long that I’ve been away from her, but I miss my little wolf. I feel like I’m missing a part of myself when I’m not with her. And normally, that would scare the shit out of me, but I’m happy. For the first time in my life, I feel like this is the right thing.

As I make my way through the quiet streets toward the Lancaster mansion, I’m not sure what I’m going to tell Rukaiya. My feelings for her have changed, they’ve become... more. And I don’t know how to explain it without saying the three words I’ve always steered far away from.

Love is volatile. It’s meant to be that way. Passion resides in violence, it’s the only way for something to grow, to burn hot and unyielding. That’s how I feel about her and I know that will never change.

I knew since the moment I met her that she wouldn’t be a pushover. She’s a challenge, and it makes me want more of her sass. It’s one of the main reasons I crave being near her.

It’s strange being home with her in Tynewood; having her beside me last night was new and refreshing, something I didn’t expect, but ultimately, I loved every moment of it. After everything we’ve been through, I want to protect her more than anything.

I hear her footfalls before I see her. Rukaiya steps toward the entrance hall as I walk into the house, and I can’t help my eyes almost bulging out when I take note of what she’s wearing—nothing but a tiny pair of shorts, and an extremely tight tank top that hugs her slim frame like a glove. My jeans become far too tight in the crotch when I drink in her curves. She smiles over at me; there’s excitement painted on her face.

“I’m glad you’re back, I was starting to worry about you. Also, dinner is ready,” she

tells me in her gentle way as she reaches me and presses her lips to mine in greeting. It's the best damn greeting I've ever received.

Since we've been back here, I've seen a very different side of Rukaiya. She's more relaxed, her eyes no longer hold the fear that was so palpable in her gazes. But it's not only her that's changed. I have too. My focus is on us, on building a future that I never thought I would ever have. What I found with her has made me believe happiness is possible.

Even though Thane is still out there, I know we'll get through anything if he ever tries to come back and take her from me. But I have faith that Tarian will find him, and he'll make sure Thanatos Calvert never sees the light of day again.

30

Rukaiya

"There's something I want to talk to you about," he says quietly, making me nervous. Etienne doesn't look angry, but something tells me that my wanting to meet with Fergus is going to be a challenge. It's the only thing I can think of right now that would have him so tense.

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The muscles in his shoulders and arms are tight with worry. Under my fingertips, I feel them pulse and tighten. Those dark eyes turn stormy, as if the impending conversation is going to be bad.

“Fergus is trying to broker a deal with us,” he starts, lacing his fingers through mine. He tugs me along, and we disappear down the hallway toward the office. Once inside, he shuts the door behind us, and I’m planted against the heavy wooden surface. “He wants freedom in return for the names of the men he’s been working with, all those who helped Abner elicit all the shit he’d been dealing with.”

“Okay?” It’s a question, because I’m not sure where he’s going with this. I don’t want him to tell me I can’t see the man. He raised me as his daughter; I should be able to say something to him, ask him why he did it. All the revelations that have come to light in the recent weeks are becoming too much for me.

“Hey,” Etienne says, and I realize my cheeks are wet when he swipes his thumbs across my face. It’s a gentle, loving action, and my heart calms somewhat from the erratic thudding against my ribs. “Please don’t cry, little wolf.” I know he’s trying to make me happy, to give me what I need. “I’ll take you to see him, but you’re not spending a minute alone with him. Either me, Ares, or Tarian will be there with you. I would much prefer it was me.”

Nodding, I chance a small smile. “I’d like it if you were there. I’m not sure I can do it on my own in any case. So,” I look up at him, meeting those dark, yet soulful eyes that always seem to look right through me, “When can we go?”

“I’ll take you tomorrow. You can get your questions answered, then I want to get the

contract signed. Ares, Tarian, and I will go to him after you've left and make him tell us everything we need to know. We need to take Thane down, his plans obviously include you, but mainly, it seems he wants to get rid of Tarian, so there's something there that he's hiding."

"So, you're not going to hurt Fergus?" I ask, not hopeful, more concerned. If they did hurt him, I would be more worried about Etienne's conscience than anything else. He's not a violent person, and if he did anything to change that, I know it would weigh on him.

"I can't promise," he tells me, before pressing a kiss to my lips, which is soft and gentle, a stark contrast to what he's promising to do to the man who, up until only a few days ago, I called Dad.

"Please don't do anything you might regret," I plead with him. "Because once you do something, you can't take it back."

"I know that, gorgeous," he smirks. "But that man hurt you, and that doesn't sit well with me. Anyone touches you, and I mean even looks at you the wrong way, I'll make sure they never see the light of day again."

"That...sounds so ominous," I tell him, and it's true. It sounds like he's definitely going to do something bad.

"It might be, depends on how forthcoming he is." This time I know whatever is going on has to happen. The new Crowns of Tynewood are trying to clean up the society, they're trying to make sure the Sovereign keep their name and reputation spotless, and I can respect that.

"You know," I tell him. "I think you just enjoy your time with the boys too much," I tease him.

“I do. But my time with you is much more precious. And you know why?”

I shake my head, but watch his face turn from playful to serious, and my heart catapults into my throat.

“Because I’m falling, Rukaiya. No. Scrap that. I have fallen, you’re in here,” he admits, touching two fingers to the spot where his heart is. “And I can’t ever take you out. I don’t want to. You’re special to me and I...”

He’s struggling with the words, but I nod, knowing what he’s trying to tell me. “I heart you, too,” I spit out quickly, realizing what I’ve just said. If he can’t say the L word, then we’ll use an alternative. One that means just as much to me.

The corners of his mouth tip up, and I’m awarded the smile that makes every inch of me turn hot and needy.

“I heart you too, little wolf,” he murmurs, before kissing me quickly. “Let’s go get dinner. And then I’m taking you home, to the Durand house.”

“Will you dance for me?” Etienne asks, as he sits on the sofa. The Durand mansion is nothing like the Lancaster one. This one has modern lines with white furniture and expensive artwork on the walls. There are floor-to-ceiling windows that show off the gardens, which stretch for miles.

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“If I do, what’s in it for me?” I’m standing before him, my dress is soft and flowy, stopping mid-thigh, so if I wanted to dance right now, I could.

Etienne lifts the glass to his lips, sipping the vodka he poured—neat and a double shot—as if it’s water. He doesn’t wince, he merely regards me.

“I’ll do anything you’d like me to do, little wolf,” he grins, his smile lighting up his face, and I remember why I promised myself that I’d try to make him smile like that every day.

“Mm, anything?”

He tips his head to the side, offering me one swift nod, before he gestures at me with his glass. “Within reason, gorgeous.” His expression is neutral, there’s not a hint of amusement in it.

“Okay,” I nod, padding over to the stereo. I turn on the system and scroll through his playlists. Etienne has music of every genre, but it’s the one song I choose that I know will send the message that I’ve been trying to say for the past few weeks, but I’ve been too afraid to utter the words.

It’s been so long since I danced to a pop song. ‘I Can’t Fall in Love Without You’ by Zara Larsson streams through the speakers, and I allow the melody to take over and my feet to move. I feel graceful, like I’m flying. And when I spin in front of Etienne, my focus is on him with every pirouette.

There’s a hunger in his gaze as he watches me. Taking in every part of me, I feel his

gaze on me as if he were touching me. My stomach tumbles wildly with every movement, with every grin and wink he offers, and with each lyric, I feel myself admitting more than I want to, but I can't help it.

I want Etienne, I love him, but I'm too scared of him rejecting me to tell him. Even though I know he won't, it's still an innate fear that's got a hold of me. And I don't like this feeling of freefalling. I've been rejected from both fathers I've come to know, and I wonder if Etienne will ever get tired of me. I've never felt so unsure before, and it's jarring.

"Rukaiya," the deep voice that comes through my worried thoughts is Etienne's, and when his hand grips my shoulders, preventing me from spinning out, I stop suddenly, and I'm met with those deep, dark eyes that seem to look right into my soul.

"What?"

"Did I lose you there?" He's worried. His black brows are creased in the middle, and I realize I completely got lost in the fear that's held me back. I nod. "Why are you so lost inside your head, little wolf?"

His question is a balm to my frayed heart, and I look at him directly, wanting him to guess the crippling anxiety that's got a hold of me.

"I-I..." Shaking my head, I take a long, deep breath and attempt to focus on my breathing instead of what I want to do. The song changes, and Post Malone's voice breaks through to me as he sings 'Saint-Tropez.'

"Listen to me, Rukaiya, you can tell me anything that's bothering you; I'm not going to leave you. I'm not your parents, I'm not anyone who you've had in your life before."

“You’re just stubborn,” I tell him with a smile, hoping to lighten the mood, but Etienne’s having none of it. I used to do that, avoid serious conversations when I could. Dahlia told me I needed to be honest with him, I owe him that much. “Do you remember when I told you I was afraid of you?”

He nods, but he doesn’t say anything, and I know he’s giving me the lead. He’s waiting for me, and I appreciate it.

“Well, I am. I’m falling, Etienne, I’ve fallen, and I’ve never loved someone before. It’s the scariest thing I’ve ever experienced; it’s worse than—”

His mouth crashes down on mine, silencing me and my fears. The softness of his lips, the flavor of vodka on his tongue take over me as he darts inside my mouth. We move together, Etienne picking me up, walking us over to the window, and he pins me against the cool glass.

With threats behind us and with Etienne in front of me, I lose myself in his warmth as he holds me up. My legs wrap around his waist, and the rigidity of his zipper, with the bulge behind it, rubs against me, causing me to whimper with need that burns my blood hot with desire.

“You’re going to make me come in my fucking jeans, little dancer,” he growls against my mouth as he tugs my bottom lip with his teeth, biting down until I’m clawing at his shoulders.

“I like making you lose control,” I tell him earnestly. His gaze is locked on mine, his eyes dancing with a flame of passion, of craving and of hunger that looks like he’s about to devour me right here against the window.

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“I wish we were in the city right now,” he tells me. “Because I’d fuck you against this window, so they can all see who you belong to.”

“I’m not a possession, Etienne.” I sigh, rolling my eyes, as he chuckles darkly.

“Oh? Do you want to bet?” he teases, rolling his hips as he rubs against me once more, causing my toes to curl from the friction against my clit.

“Yes, I do want to bet,” I challenge him once more, and he does the same motion, sending my head falling back against the glass. My eyes close as the pleasure he’s administering on my body takes over, and soon enough, I’ll be flying into the abyss, but Etienne has other ideas because he stops all movement. “What—?”

“You will look at me when you come, you’ll look into my eyes because I want to see your face painted in the pleasure that I’m bestowing on your body.” He moves again, and as much as I want to shut my eyes and get lost in the cloud of happiness, I don’t. I focus on him, showing him how much I love his body taunting mine.

He moves faster, his body humping mine against the goddamned window, and I’ve had enough of this bullshit teasing. Reaching for his belt buckle, I tug at it, causing him to still all movement. He watches me as I pull on his zipper and push it down. When I slip my hand into his boxer briefs, I grip his shaft, eliciting a growl from him. I can’t help but smile at my power over him.

With two slow strokes, soon enough, I’m on the floor, my knees hitting the cold tiles as my mouth envelops his erection. I allow my tongue to tease him, before I suck him deep into my mouth. I feel the tip of him hit the back of my throat, and I swallow,

breathing through the gagging feeling that takes over for a moment.

Once I've calmed down, and I feel him slip deeper inside, I smile as his hands grip my ponytail, holding me in place. He's taking control, and I allow him to by lowering my hands. Etienne's hips move swiftly, and I know he's close, he's going to lose all control, and I ache for him to always take me like this. To make me feel like I'm his, that I'm everything he's ever wanted, just like he's everything I've ever needed without knowing it.

I'm wet. My panties are soaked, but all I want is for him to find his euphoria. I want to taste him. And I don't have to wait long, because seconds later, he's grunting and filling my mouth with his release.

I look up at him, watching him for a moment, before he slips from my mouth, and he watches me as I toy with his arousal on my tongue and lips. "Little tease," he growls, his eyes burning a hole right through me. I nod before I swallow every drop and my tongue darts out, licking at the remnants, which coat the shaft of his softening cock. "Are you trying to kill me?" he arches a brow in question as he regards me. With one hand, he helps me to stand, and I can't stop the giggle that bubbles in my chest.

"I was just trying to see if I could... I mean if I could give you the pleasure you've given me." I don't know why I feel like a shy teenager who's doing this for the first time, but Etienne makes me feel like I'm still a virgin who's exploring the world.

"You did more than that," he tells me, pressing his lips to mine. I'm shocked that he'd do that, but he doesn't seem to mind that I was just down on my knees, with his cock in my mouth.

"So, are we going to the bedroom?" I question, in hopes that we could spend the day in bed and the salacious smile I'm greeted with tells me that's just what we're going to do.

“I don’t think I ever want to leave the bedroom if you’re there, but then again, there are many other places we could have fun,” Etienne tells me with a grin that sends a shiver of anticipation through me.

“Oh?”

“Oh yes,” he winks, lacing his fingers with mine, as he tugs me down the hallway to his bedroom, and I know it’s a topic for another day. Today, though, we’ll enjoy each other, and the quiet that we’ve worked so hard for.

31

Etienne

Rukaiya’s asleep when I slip out of bed and into the cold room. The darkness has already overshadowed the bedroom, and when I make my way to the door, I stop momentarily to look over at her. Long blonde plaits fan over the pillow, her smooth alabaster skin glows in the dim light of the moon that seems to penetrate the darkness, shining only on her. It’s as if she were an angel, and it’s seeking out her light.

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Leaving her peaceful and asleep, I head out into the hallway and pad through the empty house down toward the office where I find Ares and Tarian already working on something. My best friends look up at me when I walk into the space, and Ares lifts a folder.

The moment I have it, I flip it open and scan the wording. He's changed a few of the items on the contract, but now that it's ready, I would like to get this over and done with. I want Fergus out of my life, out of Rukaiya's life, and as soon as that happens, we can move on from this bullshit. This is no longer revenge; it's about putting the past behind us.

"You think he'll agree to all of this?" I ask, looking at Ares. We really should have Philipe here as well. I'm sure he's busy with business in the city, but this decision has to be made by all four of us. His club is on the verge of making it big. When he told us about opening a chain of clubs in London, Paris, and Rome, I could tell it meant a lot to him. He's never been one for the Sovereign. Even though Abner was adamant both sons should sit at the table, Philipe has always had his own path.

"He has to," Ares tells me, as he settles back in the chair, regarding me with dark eyes. Fergus was already nervous about spilling the beans, but he was the one who told us he'd sign the contract if we brought it to him. If he fucks us over, I won't think twice about killing him. Having blood on my hands doesn't faze me, I'll enjoy watching him take his last breath, and when he does, I'll know it's over.

But something tells me that it may not be the ending we're all hoping for.

We have Thane and Yasmine to deal with. They're another concern I've tried to

ignore, but each time I look at my girl, their threat hangs heavily on my shoulders. Thane wants the Sovereign, and I know he won't stop until he's sitting at the table. Him being both Rukaiya's father and Tarian's uncle makes me nervous. If he were to have a hold on this society, and if Abner were to regain control on the men he lost not so long ago, we may all be in shit.

"Etienne," Tarian calls to me, breaking into the thoughts of doubt and worry that have taken hold of me. "I know that you want to take her away. And I respect that. You know that Thane won't step back. I have a feeling he wants his daughter along with a seat and inking into the Sovereign."

"Well, he can't have her. She's mine, and I won't stop until he's either admitted defeat, or..." I don't voice what I want to say, because I know Tarian wouldn't be happy. As much as I know he hates his uncle, having his best friend harm anyone in his family, is something he may not be able to forgive. And I refuse to lose one of my best friends over this.

"You know, Etienne, I never pegged you for a killer." There's a smile on Tarian's face as he watches me. Dark hair falls into his eyes, and his lip ring glints as he grins. "I know that she's your soul mate, and I ain't standing in the way of that and neither will Thane. I'll make sure of it." There's a dark, dangerous promise in his words, but I have to shake my head in response to him. I can't watch him kill his uncle for me. Or, for that matter, for Rukaiya.

Thane is her father.

"As much as I would love to see the asshole dead, we can't do that. Not right now anyway. We will find another way," I tell him.

"What if we don't?" This comes from Ares. He knows that sometimes we have to do shit we don't want to do. He had to put his father behind bars, and I know it hurt him

to do it. Even though Abner was an evil bastard, he's still blood.

"I'm not sure I can answer that right now," I tell Ares, then turn my attention back to Tarian. "Whatever happens, I'll never break apart your family."

"My family is dead," Tarian grits out through clenched teeth. "They died the night that car crashed into the fucking truck. Everything after that, all the bullshit Thane wants me to believe, I won't. Yasmine is not my mother because she died along with my dad."

"So, there won't be any way that you would consider reconciling with her?" Ares asks Tarian. I wonder briefly if Ares would ever forgive Abner.

Tarian gives us both a look—cold and emotionless. "As much as I would've wanted my family back together when I was barely sixteen, that stupid boy is long gone. There are no happy families in Tynewood, all that's left are the scars of lies and deception from the past."

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Stepping forward, I place a hand on Tarian's shoulder before saying, "You say that now—"

"I'll say that always," he sneers adamantly. "You should understand what it's like to lose a parent." His words aren't meant to hurt, but they do. Even though both my folks are alive, they may as well be dead. That's how the three of us made it through our teens, we found our family in each other.

Ares's mother was murdered, Tarian's mother and father died, and my parents were absent. We only had each other then, and we only have each other now. But we also gained family—Rukaiya and Dahlia are both part of us now.

"What's going on with you and Grecia?" I ask, suddenly recalling the pretty brunette that's been hanging around. Her father was Abner's best friend. That is until Abner was arrested. The Elders all walked away, keeping their heads down as the stories swirled in the local press.

"Nothing."

Tarian doesn't look up as he responds. Instead, he pulls out a pack of smokes and taps one out, but I notice it's not a cigarette, it's a joint. He places it between his lips and flicks his lighter, burning the end until the cherry burns bright.

"Don't bullshit us, Tar," Ares chuckles, crossing his arms in front of his chest as he watches Tarian. "She's been hanging around you like a lost puppy."

"She wants a friend. I told her she can have at it. I don't do relationships, you're both

all loved up, I don't need that in my life." He pulls deeply on the smoke before handing it to me. His eyes close, the blue disappearing behind his lids, as he leans his head back and savors the flavor of the joint.

Once my lungs are full, I hand it to Ares who takes a long pull. "And you think telling her you don't do relationships has sunk in? I mean... I don't think she's a quitter, Tar. You may have a clinger." Ares laughs out loud as he takes another drag before handing the joint back to Tarian.

"It's fucking bullshit, man," Tar shakes his head. The weed taking hold of us as we share the smoke around until there's nothing left.

"You're telling me you wouldn't hit that if she offered it to you no strings attached?" I question, shocked that Tarian is so adamant about this girl. He's no manwhore, but he's had his fair share of girls at school.

"I didn't say that. What I did say was that I'm not looking for some happily ever after, and she is. Now, are we going to get this shit done?" He grabs the folder, shoving a pen into his jeans pocket, and turns for the door, leaving us staring after his retreating form.

The moment he disappears from sight, I turn to Ares who looks amused. "I think he may be in denial," he tells me as he rounds the desk and follows me out into the hallway. Tarian's already outside by the time we reach the front door.

It doesn't take long for us to all slip into Tarian's black Jeep, and the engine roars to life. I pray that Rukaiya doesn't wake up until I'm back. I want to return with good news, something I can tell her that will make her smile.

"If he does anything to fuck this up," I tell both men, "I'll slice him limb to limb."

Ares glances at me in the rearview mirror before nodding. “I’m with you on that. I need to know what the fuck he’s set up with the societies in Europe, and I know he’s still working for my father.” That’s what worries me. Even though Abner is behind bars, he’s still a threat.

“You know, I reckon he’s also working with Thane. No matter how much he may hate my uncle, I have a feeling they’re trying to do something that could bring down the whole Sovereign.”

“Why would they bring down the one thing they want?” I ask, confused at Tarian’s logic, because, to me, it doesn’t make sense.

Blue eyes glance in the mirror before landing back on the road. “Because if they bring down the leadership that’s seated now, they can rebuild. They can create a society that will only obey them. And if that happens, I’m sure what we’ve managed to fix over the past few months will crumble.”

The moment he says it, I realize he’s right. Thane wants a seat, so does Fergus. Once we get a confession from the asshole, we should kill him. If we release him, he’ll only continue what he started.

“What about Billy?” I ask, looking at Ares. He’s been friends with the older man for most of his life, and I wonder if we can find any more answers there.

“I haven’t spoken to him in a while. Perhaps it’s time I pay him a visit.” Ares’s voice is low, there’s menace that laces each word, and I’m worried he’s going to step into the ring again.

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My best friend enjoys throwing punches, fighting for money, and if he gets back into that life, I know Dahlia will walk away. She loves him, but he needs to keep his ass on the straight and narrow.

“Maybe Tar and I should head out there,” I offer, hoping he’ll agree. But Ares is a stubborn asshole.

“No, I’ll go with you. I’m not going to fight,” he tells me, his dark eyes meeting mine, but I can’t tell if he’s bullshitting me, or if he’s really over that life.

“You know you have to stick by your promise to Dahlia,” I remind him. He doesn’t bother looking my way, all I get is a nod. “Don’t ignore me, asshole.”

“Yeah, yeah, you just worry about your girl, I’ll sort everything else out.” Ares laughs, waving his hand in the air, but I can read the tension that’s radiating off him.

Tarian pulls up to the church and kills the engine. Not long now and we’ll have information. Hopefully, we’ll get all the names of the men who are working for Abner, and also, those who are faithful to Thane.

Exiting the car, I shut the door, but before I can make my way inside, a voice comes from behind me, and my body grows cold.

“Leaving me in bed like a fragile princess is not the way to gain my trust, Etienne Durand.” I turn to regard Rukaiya standing in the dim light of the early morning. Dressed in a pair of black tight pants with a black hoodie covering her blonde hair, she looks formidable, someone you don’t want to mess with, and I certainly don’t.

“You stalkin’ me, little wolf?”

“You fuckin’ wish. Take me in to see him,” she orders, strolling toward me in her black combat boots. Her rough exterior makes my dick harden as I watch her.

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Rukaiya

He looks at me, staring at me for a long while, before he shakes his head and chuckles. His eyes bore into me, piercing every part of me with a mere glance. Etienne laces his fingers through mine before tugging me along behind him.

Tarian’s blue eyes lock on mine. I take him in for a moment. He looks just like Thane; the resemblance is uncanny. Dark stubble adorns his jawline, sharp features, along with full lips, make him look like a model. Etienne hasn’t shaved either, both men look like they’ve had a rough night.

I glance at the man who’s stolen my heart, his brown hair is messy, his eyes are shining, though, as if he’s about to get a gift at Christmas. His angular jaw is hidden by the dark smattering of hair there, and my fingers itch to touch it. To feel him.

We enter the church that I recall Dahlia telling me about all those months ago. Once inside, my eyes land on the man I called father for most of my life. He’s bound to a chair, his face is caked in blood, his left eye swollen, and his lip cut.

When he looks up at me, a small, sordid smile crosses his face, and I want to punch him, to hurt him like he did me. Even though he never got physical with me, he killed my mother. I’m sure of it.

“There’s the pretty little princess,” Fergus mutters through the saliva dripping from

his mouth. “I didn’t think I’d see you here today.”

“I’m full of surprises, just like you,” I tell him. “Seems you taught me well over the years, Fergus.” I stop before him, inches from the asshole who I’ve come to hate over the years. He may have raised me, but I will never be like him.

“What are you doing here?” His question is stilted, Ares and Tarian stand behind him, and I notice Ares holding a folder, which I’m guessing is the agreement. I know they need information from him, but I need to know the truth first.

“Why? That’s all I need to know.” He locks his weary gaze on mine, and I wonder if he’ll ever give me the truth. Would he ever find the place inside himself that’s human? That is, if he still is human. Most of the men I’ve met who are part of the Sovereign are so broken, so tortured by power and greed, they no longer have a scrap of humanity left.

“Why what, princess? Why did I play daddy?” Fergus sneers, before spitting blood onto the floor inches from my feet, and I notice Etienne’s fingers fisting at his sides as he regards the asshole before us.

“Yes.”

“Did you know your mother was a teen mommy?” He chuckles. “The woman who raised you was nothing more than a maid to Thane. After he knocked up the pretty little blonde dancer, he paid me to sort her out.”

“What?” My brows furrow in confusion because I know who my mother was. I found her dead in a bathtub when I was six. His lies are taking hold, and my heart is thudding against my ribs.

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“Many years ago, when Thane was young and stupid, he met up with a beautiful blonde who was a dancer for the New York Ballet Company. She came all the way to the States from Amsterdam.”

“That makes no sense, how can that be?”

He shakes his head, but the satisfied smile on his face makes my own fingers tingle to slap him, to grip his throat and squeeze until there's no life left in him.

“Your mother was sixteen when Thane knocked her up,” Fergus admits. He doesn't look away. He stares right into my eyes, and I know for a fact that he's not lying in that moment.

“But—”

“Are you fucking with her?” Etienne steps forward, his voice livid, dripping rage and venom, but Fergus merely shakes his head.

“No, I'm serious. Look, I fucked up, I should never have taken the money to play daddy for her, but Thane didn't want his name tarnished, so he wanted me to take the dancer and kill her. I couldn't.”

“What happened when he found out you didn't?” I ask, folding my arms across my chest, a cold shiver snaking up and down my spine. My father knows I'm alive, he clearly knows that Fergus didn't do what he was paid to do.

“He told me if I wanted to keep the baby, he wouldn't have me thrown out of the

Sovereign. I was born to be a Crown, he wasn't. My father was one of the Elders of the Scottish society." His confidence shines through his words. I've never heard about Fergus's life before me. He never opened up to me ever. The people I grew up with are nothing more than strangers playing their parts on the stage that is my life.

"But that makes no sense. Who was the woman who raised me? Why would she even agree to this?"

"She was the love of my life, and the maid who worked for Thane. He paid her a lump sum to shut the hell up, and on your sixth birthday, she went to him, begged him to contact your mother and let her meet you. I guess the guilt of the lies got to her."

"And he had her killed..." my voice is barely a whisper, but he nods. "What about my real mother?"

"She's alive, she saw you the moment we walked into the church before your pretty little dance."

"You took me there to show her who I was?" My knees feel weak, and I want to slump to the floor, I want to cry, to scream, to plead with this man to take me back, to show me who she is, but he can't.

"She saw you. But she can never come to you or your father will kill her."

Something isn't adding up. I don't understand why Thane would allow us both to live if he was so adamant that he wanted her dead when he learned of the pregnancy. "Why would she want to see me and then let me go again?"

"Because Thane knows if he kills you, he'll lose Tarian, he'll lose Yasmine."

“Why?”

“You’re blood. You have Calvert blood running through your veins. Even though Thane was never an Elder, you’re still part of the Sovereign, and too many people know about you. Tarian and Yasmine are your family, and I know she would never allow him to harm you. And of course, your boyfriend’s little friend will avenge you if anything were to happen.”

“So, my mother is in Europe, my father is Thane Calvert, and you’re nothing to me?” I bite out, frustration evident in my tone, but it doesn’t make Fergus stop smiling. He’s enjoying the pain he’s clearly caused in my life.

“Your mother spread her legs for the first man to offer her some form of affection,” Fergus spits, “Just like her daughter.” My hand stings the moment it makes contact with his face. Even though I don’t know her personally, I hate that he can even say that about her.

“Fuck you.” My words are drenched in hatred so fierce that I am shocked by the violence in them. “You’re nothing but a fucking lackey, paid to make problems go away, and you couldn’t even do that properly.”

A small wince creases his face, and I realize I’m right. Fergus wanted more, he wanted recognition, and he didn’t get it.

“Is that why you were working for Abner? To get a seat at the table?” I watch him, his expression, his body language. The same things he taught me all those years ago, I use on him now. When I was younger, he would tell me how to watch out for myself, how to make sure I didn’t end up in a bad situation, and all those lessons paid off, because now I know I can take him down even if he wasn’t tied to a chair.

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“I was working for Abner to prove myself. Thane would never let me forget what I did. And now that he’s back, he’ll kill me the moment he finds me.”

“So, we’re your only way out of here,” Etienne speaks up, dropping to crouch before Fergus. “And you’re signing this agreement before you answer any more questions. Ares and Tarian will ensure your safe passage from Tynewood, while I stay with Rukaiya.”

“I want a plane.”

“I’m sure you fucking do, Fergus. You’re an asshole and I do not trust you for one fucking second. And if you think you’re making demands, you’re sorely mistaken.”

My gaze is locked on the interaction between the men. The tension in the church is palpable, thick enough that it could be sliced with a dagger. Ares steps forward, undoing the binding around Fergus’s hands. Once he’s freed, there’s a pen and contract before him. It doesn’t take long for him to scrawl his signature on the line, and soon enough, Etienne is in his face once more.

“Now, you’re going to tell us exactly what Thane’s end goal is. You’re also going to tell us where Rukaiya’s mother is, and once we have the names of every man who’s worked beside you while you were under Abner’s control, we will think about letting you go.”

Wide eyes flit over to me, then to Ares and Tarian, before landing back on Etienne. The man looks scared, more so than I’ve ever seen him. Something has him spooked, and I hope he’ll confess what it is.

“You can’t do that. We had a—”

“We had fuck all,” Etienne bites out. “Now, talk or you’ll be buried behind the church like the rest of them.” A cold shiver streaks through me at the threat Etienne just promised. I believe him when he says it. The Gilded Sovereign are violent in their ways, I don’t doubt for a second that there are dead bodies scattered on the land surrounding us.

“Fine. Then let me tell you a little story,” Fergus starts, and his ominous words grip me in their icy hold, and I know we’re about to hear far more volatile things than we expected.

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Etienne

He looks like he’s enjoying this. The control he has over all four of us is what he’s lording as power, but it’s nothing like that. We’re here to learn about the past, about what fucked up things Abner, Thane, and the rest of the Sovereign have done.

“When I joined the society years ago, Thane and I were best friends. I didn’t know he was nothing more than an extravagant playboy fucking everything from here to South America. He got involved with some dangerous people, and when Abner learned about it, he forbade him from entering the Sovereign.”

The silence hangs heavily over the room, our attention wrapped up in the story being told. I wonder how much of it is embellished and how much is fact.

“He was good... for a while. Until the beautiful dancer came to town. Gretchen was nothing more than an innocent in the game that Thane enjoyed, and when she slept with him, he was enamored. I thought perhaps he would’ve changed. I hoped he

would become an honest man. But then two months later, she returned from New York having lost her place in the ballet company because of her pregnancy.”

“And she came to tell Thane about it,” I mutter.

Fergus nods. “He confessed to me that he was in over his head. He looked scared, and I knew the moment Abner found out, Thane would be cast out for good.”

“But the brotherhood of the Sovereign kept you from spilling the truth,” Ares speaks. He knows, we all do. Once you’re sworn in, even if you’re merely a member of the Gilded Sovereign, nothing can touch you. The Elders are the only ones who can send you packing, and I’m not talking about a vacation. You’d end up in the graveyard behind the church.

“And you knew if you told on Thane, he would have something on you. What was it?” I ask, wondering if there was more to the story.

His pained stare pins me to the spot. His mouth falls open, and I wait for the words that don’t come. I want honesty, I want the fucking truth. Losing all control, my hand grips the front of his shirt, and I drag him up onto wobbly legs. Bringing his face to mine, I keep him inches from me.

“I asked you a fucking question.”

“Etienne,” Ares’s tone is low and controlled, far more fucking control than I possess right now. I want to tell him to fuck right off, but I don’t, because he’s the one in charge. He’s second-in-command when Philipe isn’t here. So, I lower Fergus to the chair and step back.

“Thane had my first wife killed. I don’t have proof, but I know it was him. He threatened the woman I loved again, knowing it was my weak spot.”

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“That doesn’t make sense. Thane isn’t stupid, he wouldn’t toy with you.”

Fergus nods as if it should make sense, but it doesn’t. “He would because I was the one raising Rukaiya. If I told anyone about her origins, Abner would’ve and could’ve gotten a paternity test done without so much as a blink.”

Ares steps forward then before speaking, “And Thane wanted to be the good soldier.”

Fergus nods. “He did. And he was. He obeyed like the rest of us, but the moment Abner announced that you were taking a step up, along with your brother, Tarian, and Etienne, Thane lost it. He believed he was next in line.”

“Because my father was his brother, an Elder.”

“Yes, the line falls to the eldest male blood relative, but only to him if you weren’t alive. And he couldn’t very well kill you, because that would look suspicious.”

“Hasn’t stopped him before.”

“But he loves your mother, and if you were to die, he’d lose her.” Fergus offers a small smile as if the pieces falling into place is what he wanted all along. Perhaps that was his plan.

“I can’t believe my uncle is capable of love,” Tarian says to no one in particular because his attention isn’t even on us anymore. He’s looking out at the window, his back turned, and I wonder how he’s dealing with all these truths that are unfolding.

Tynewood has always been a town of secrets. It's been filled with the darkest of twists that have taken lives, and I don't know how much more we can deal with.

"Give us names, I want every single name, including Rukaya's mother's name. I want it all." Throwing a notebook and pen at Fergus, I fold my arms in front of my chest, waiting for him to fill the pages with information.

"I want to go see him." Tarian speaks, pivoting to finally look at us. "I want to see Thane and finish this for good."

The door behind us creaks, and the heavy footfalls alert us that someone is close by. Nobody knows we're here, but that doesn't mean Thane didn't follow us. But then again, if he did, why would he have taken so long to enter.

"Bastards," Philippe smirks as he stalks into the space. "Oh, and a beautiful rose." He grins as his gaze lands on my girl.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, pushing her behind me. He was meant to be here last night, but we got a call that he was delayed in New York.

"Sovereign business is my business. I like to know what the fuck is going on," he says as he nears us. His eyes focused on Fergus who's furiously writing on the pages.

"Thought you were stuck in the Big Apple?" Ares questions. I'm not sure why, but the tension between the brother's is thick.

"Figured I needed to help take care of shit. Also, you said you needed a plane, I have one," the eldest Lancaster brother says. "I take it that ticket out of here is for him." He gestures with his head toward Fergus, and we all nod. "Fine. I'll fly him out once you're done here."

Ares nears his brother, his gaze focused on the older man. “And then?”

Philippe shrugs nonchalantly, “Guess I’ll hang around, see how Billy is doing.” Philippe has never been one for that part of town. He’s always been the poised, elegant brother, always dressed in expensive suits rather than the black combat boots and rock band T-shirts we prefer. He pivots around, taking in the church that’s been abandoned. The only people who come here anymore are the three of us—Ares, Tarian, and me.

“I can handle this shit,” Ares confirms.

“Oh, I know you can brother, but I like to watch.” With a wink, Philippe leaves us inside the building just as Fergus finishes up his list.

Fergus’s hands are shaking when he hands back the pages to me. The scrawl is legible thankfully, and I already recognize a few names on this list. Those men will soon see their end. Once we clean the society of the traitors, we’ll be able to start fresh. Or, we could even shut it down.

“Are you sure you’re giving us everything?” I ask, waving the pages in front of him. For the first time since we walked in here today, I recognize fear on his face.

“This is all I know. I swear.”

“I want to see my father,” Rukaiya speaks.

Tarian nods. “And I want to see my uncle.”

I guess it’s time we took the fight to the man himself.

Rukaiya

Before heading to Thane's house, Ares said we needed to stop at the Lancaster mansion to collect Dahlia. We needed time to plan what we would do when we got to his place, but I already knew what I wanted to do.

Killing him would be the final nail in the old Sovereign coffin, but we couldn't just murder him because he has links to the names on the list who we needed to get rid of. Stalking into the office behind the guys, my body is tense with both excitement and fear. If things go wrong, we could all be hurt. Badly.

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“Thane won’t be expecting us because he won’t know Fergus has given us anything,” Ares says as he settles behind the desk, setting down the folder with the signed agreement from Fergus.

“I want to go in first,” I speak up, needing to be the one who talks to the man who is my biological father.

“No.”

“Etienne, this isn’t a discussion,” I bite out in frustration. “You can’t be my hero all the time. I told you, I can handle myself.”

“Etienne is right,” Ares says then. “You don’t go in alone. If you’re part of this family, we do things together.” His eyes bore into me, just as Dahlia strolls in dressed in a pair of super tight black yoga pants and a black tank top. She’s sporting a hoodie that’s got the pattern of a skeleton all over the front.

“I’ll go with her; you guys hang back.” She smiles at her man who’s narrowed his gaze as he regards her. “Not too far back.”

Ares crooks his finger, calling her over, which she quickly obeys, and he pulls her into his lap. “You’re cruising for a—”

“Get a room, guys,” Etienne rolls his eyes, and we all laugh at their public display of affection. “Let’s do this, you and Dahlia head inside, sit with him, talk if you need to, but I’ll be on speaker. If anything goes wrong before we walk in, I’m racing in guns fucking blazing.”

“And I’ll take him out without a second thought,” Tarian confirms. “He may be our blood, but he’s not family. Remember that.” His warning is true, yet it still pains me. I can’t even spend time with my father to get to know him. Yes, he may be an evil bastard, but he’s still the man who made me.

“Hey.” Etienne pulls me into his arms, covering me in his warmth. “I’m always here. I’ll never leave you, so if you for one second doubt me...” His words filter into nothing, and I know he’s trying to say I should trust him. That’s an emotion that’s always been difficult for me to accept. I’ve always been wary of people, and it seems I was right to be.

“It’s difficult,” I mumble into his tee, the material stealing my words, but I know he’s heard me. Etienne places a kiss on the top of my head before stepping back.

“Go get changed, and we’ll head out in a few.” His gaze holds me hostage for a long moment before Dahlia pulls me out of the office and up to her bedroom. She and Ares have made this their home, and when we enter the epic room, I can’t help but gasp.

“It’s gorgeous in here.”

She smiles confidently. “He let me put my touch on it.” Even though it’s still muted tones of black and gray, there are a few pops of color—purple, red, and blue. And along one of the walls is a floor to ceiling bookshelf.

“Always the bookworm,” I tell her.

Once she lays out the black ensemble on the bed, she gives me a hug, one that steals my breath and brings tears to my eyes.

“Don’t ever feel alone. You’ve always been like a sister to me, and that will never

change. You are my family.” Dahlia’s words are healing to my fragile state. We’ve known each other for so long, and right now, I realize, even as time passes, our bond is as strong as it’s always been.

An hour later, the five of us make our way up the driveway. Dressed in black, half my face covered from the cameras, I feel invincible. But not only because of the outfit I’m donning, but because I have the three men and my best friend beside me. We’re taking over this society. We’ll be named the new Sovereign, and we’re about to cause a ruckus.

The guys hang back as promised, and Dahlia and I stop at the enormous front door. The carving in the wood signifies the Calvert coat of arms—a lion in the center wearing a crown, with two dragons on either side.

“Are you ready?” Dahlia’s voice is my only grounding force right now.

Nodding, I lift my hand and knock three times, and the door slips open with the gentle impact. My heart feels as if it’s about to leap from my chest, and I’m certain I’m about to pass out.

But I don’t.

Instead, when I push open the door further, I make my way inside, with Dahlia right behind me. The house is empty. No furniture, no paintings, nothing. Not a sound from anywhere in the house. When we reach the kitchen, we find it bare of anything besides a stove and a sleek silver refrigerator.

Pulling open the metal door, I find it empty, but it’s still chilled. They must’ve left not long before we arrived. They fucking escaped. With my best friend hot on my heels, I make my way into the dining room finding nothing. The moment we cross the threshold into the living room, we find one lone person sitting in a chair with a glass

of wine.

Familiar eyes meet mine.

But they're not that of my father. Instead, the woman who stares at us looks like she's been expecting a visit.

Hilary Durand.

"If you're looking for your father, he isn't here," she tells me. Her focus on me is piercing, cold, and wary.

"Where is he? There are questions that need answering, and he's the only one who can tell me the truth."

She doesn't move, and I wonder if he's inside somewhere, hiding from me. Perhaps he is. Maybe he's not as strong as he seems and he's afraid of a little girl. But then again, I'm no longer a scared child.

"He's gone. There's nothing for you here, Rukaiya." Her hate for me is clear, the words volatile in their delivery. "Where is my son?"

"Where is my father?" I cross my arms over my chest. We're at an impasse, and I'm not leaving until she gives me the answers I need.

"Ah, the new girl trying to be strong," Mrs. Durand grins and rises. She saunters toward us. She's dressed in an exquisite pants suit, but it's the dark circles under her eyes that give her away. She's not doing so well.

“Where is Thane Calvert?”

“If Tarian wants to see him, I’ll give him the information, but you dear, won’t ever get to speak to your father again. He’s done. So, either you can walk away, or you can stand here all night. I don’t care.” Hilary goes to walk by me, and that’s when the three men who’ve got my back push forward.

“This is ending here and now, Mother.” Etienne’s voice spits the word with violent intent, and his strength cocoons me. Hilary’s eyes are on her son, wide and wary. “Where is he?”

She opens her mouth, then shuts it. I’m tired of the games, all I want are fucking answers.

“He and Yasmine left. They’re not coming back to Tynewood.” Her words are ice to my heated skin, and a shiver races down my spine. “They haven’t told me where they’re going.” She doesn’t lock eyes with anyone, and I can tell she’s lying. She does know where they are.

“You’re a fucking liar. Always have been. My mother wouldn’t leave without saying anything to me.” Tarian’s harsh words has her flinching, but he doesn’t stop. “You can give him a message from me: I’ll find him. And when I do, he better be ready because I’ll end him.”

Hilary looks over at me again. “He’s not the perfect father, but he won’t harm you. I don’t approve of you, come to think of it, I think you’re a little whore who needs to be killed, but I respect my friend’s decision to leave you be.”

“That’s a joke, right?” My voice is scratchy, and I silently admonish myself for allowing emotion into my words. “You’re not doing me any favors because if you come near me, I’ll fucking kill you.” Anger spills over when I step closer to her.

“You tell Thane something for me, too; if he ever steps foot back in Tynewood, I’ll be the one to end him.”

Tears fill her eyes, and fear sparkles in those shimmering pools. “He knows.” I have a feeling that he does know, and he won’t be returning. But I also know that Tarian is going after him. I can feel the vengeance radiating beside me.

“This isn’t over,” Tarian vows as he spins on his heel. Before he walks out the door, he stops, glances over his shoulder as he looks at Hilary. “This is our town now. I want you gone.”

“Don’t you ever show your face here again,” Etienne says, his violent glare pinned on his mother. “The house, the money, everything is mine. You can beg for scraps from your friend.”

“You can’t be serious,” Hilary scoffs, gulping down the white wine she’s been holding onto as if it were her lifesaver.

“Oh, I don’t joke about this,” Etienne tells her. “Like Tarian said... Tynewood is ours.” He laces his fingers through mine, and we turn to leave. I can feel eyes on my back, boring into me, but I don’t turn around. I don’t look back.

It’s over.

Only, I know it’s not.

Epilogue

Etienne

Six months later

The candlelight dances across the walls, and the shadows make everything seem ominous. But as I watch Rukaiya get her ink, I've never been more excited about the future.

We may not have gotten Thane, but I know Tarian will find him. When one of my best friends told me that he was leaving to find himself, I knew what that meant. It took all I have to keep my girl from following suit. But since school started, and she's back in classes, she's been focused on getting her degree.

For now, the threats are gone, but I know it won't last long. I wouldn't mind having my friend back; I miss Tarian and his cocky comments. He needed the space, and I know he'll find it, but not having him here is like losing a part of myself.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:42 am

“Hi,” Grecia’s soft voice comes from the doorway. When she walks in, I notice she’s changed since we last saw her over six months ago. Her brown hair is longer, hanging to the middle of her back. Those deep green eyes are surrounded by thin black-rimmed glasses. And her left arm is a full sleeve of colorful ink.

“It’s been a while,” Ares remarks as she nears the table. “What can we do for you?”

“I was wondering if you’ve heard from Tarian.” She looks over at us expectantly, and I suddenly feel my chest tighten. I didn’t want him to leave without telling her, but Tarian’s stubborn.

She likes him, it’s so evident, but that’s one thing I’ve come to know about my friend, he’s against relationships.

“He hasn’t been in touch. Last we heard, he was in the Med, but we’re not sure where,” Ares informs her.

A glint of intrigue lights her face, and I watch her for a long moment before she smiles at us. “I want to go find him.”

“You’re not a Sovereign or a Crown, we can’t ask you to do that.”

She regards me, taking in my words, before replying, “I know, but I want to. If that’s okay with you Ares, Etienne?” Hope shines brightly on her pretty face, and as much as I want to deny her, I can’t find it in me to say no to her.

Ares responds for us both, “Fine. But don’t force him to come back, we just need to

know he's safe."

She smiles then, and I notice the hope lingering in her expression, even though her eyes are filled with doubt. Grecia knows what she's getting into. Even though she's new to this world, to our circle, I have a feeling she'll be around for a while longer than we all anticipated.

Maybe even longer than Tarian thinks.

"You know, I may not be a Crown, but I would do anything to be a part of a family like this," she tells us, meeting each of our gazes. Philipe stands then, stalks over to her, and stops right in front of her. We're silent, watching the interaction with confusion.

"When you come back from seeing him, we'll still be here. So when you're ready to step up to the table, to sit beside us, we will have a spot for you." It's his promise as the oldest of the four, the Elder who makes the decisions. Even though we all have to agree with his choices, he is the ultimate decision-maker.

"Are you sure?"

"You're part of the blood line to the table, Grecia," he tells her. It's true, her father sat beside Abner for a long time. Since they were all initiated. They all bear the ink of the society.

Grecia nods. "I'm not sure if the Crown is for me, but I'll give it some consideration. I know Kelli wants it, more than anything."

"She isn't the eldest child," Philipe tells her. Kelli and Grecia are sisters, Kelli being the younger, the same girl who Ares had an on and off fuck fest with. I doubt he would want her sitting beside us. She's made it clear she wants him, and even though

he's practically married to Dahlia, Kelli is stubborn.

"You're all done," Ares announces, sitting back as he covers Rukaiya's ink. The emblem sitting above her belly button is now bandaged, and soon enough, I'll be able to trace it with my tongue while I bring her to orgasm over and over again.

"We should go," I announce, shooting up from my seat.

"You rushed out of there like a bat out of hell," Rukaiya murmurs when we slip into my Jeep. The blacked-out windows hide what I'm about to do. Pulling her over the seat, I allow her to straddle my thighs.

"I wanted to do this." I growl in her ear, my lips feathering over the nape of her neck, and my teeth bare themselves as I bite down on her smooth flesh.

A whimper tumbles from her lips, and my cock is harder than it was in the goddamn room moments ago. Her heat is intoxicating.

"You're insatiable," she mumbles into my ear as her fingers tangle in my hair. The dark strands are tugged when she pulls my head back to regard me. "Are you always so volatile?"

"Only when I'm in love." The words aren't a line to get into her panties, they're the truth. Nothing more and nothing less.

"Are you admitting you're in love with me?" There's a naughty smile on her face, and I can't help but chuckle as well. Even though I've always wanted to be her hero, all I want now is to be her partner.

"I am. Is that so wrong?"

She's quiet as she toys with the beard that's growing along my jawline, her soft touch, warm fingers, and her pliant body are causing me to lose all control. If she doesn't quit it, I'll have her bent over the goddamned hood of the car in a moment.

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“Take me home and show me just how much you love me,” she whispers, tugging the lobe of my ear between her teeth, biting down softly until my dick jolts against my zipper. Before I can retaliate, she scoots off my lap, innocently, and into the passenger seat.

A soft laugh is all I’m gifted before I respond, “Oh, little wolf, be careful what you ask for.” Desire burns in her eyes, and I know they mimic my own passionate expression. This woman tests me, but I love her for it.

“Promise?”

“Don’t ever doubt me.” That’s the only answer I offer as I start the engine and peel down the road toward the house. Time to show my girl just how much she means to me, over and over again. Until she can’t walk, can’t think, and can’t remember who she is because the only name she’ll be screaming is mine.

Bonus Scene

Tarian

It turns out my uncle is worse than Abner. He’s convinced the world owes him something. A need for revenge has taken over me, and the thought of him ever getting to sit at the head of the table is laughable because I’ll make sure he never sees the light of fucking day again.

Even though I’m nowhere near as fucked up as he is, fear that I could one day turn into a tyrant like that makes me wary of being anywhere near the Sovereign which

brings me to my little getaway. Even though I'm out here looking for Thane, I needed space from town, from the guys, from the memories of what Tynewood did to me.

The sun burns bright, and I move my shades to the bridge of my nose. There aren't any people out and about yet, but I know in the next hour or so, this place will be swarming with tourists. I just wanted to disappear from the world for a while. I wanted to find my uncle and make sure he pays for what he did to my father.

Without getting his hands dirty, he ensured I would be orphaned, or so I thought. That is until my mother appeared, alive and well. What Thane didn't bank on was me taking a seat at the table and sending him running. He didn't realize that I'd grown up, and I was ready to take him down. He wants what I have, but he fucked that up when he killed my father instead of me.

As much as I want to go back to Tynewood and be with my brothers, I can't. Not until I finish what Thane started. The last I heard, he and my mother were hiding out here, on an island in the Med. But no one has spotted him yet.

The moment my feet hit the cool sand, I stop and take in the ocean that greets me. This place is heaven, there's nothing more I could want, and for a moment, I don't miss home. Tynewood is a distant memory. It could change. I may go back, but right now, all I can see for miles is clear blue waters.

"Tarian?" My blood chills at the sound of my name. All the fucking way in Capri and someone knows me. Jesus, can I not escape where I'm from even for a couple of months?

I turn to the voice. My gaze rakes in the beauty strolling toward me in denim cut offs and a tiny bikini top that does nothing to hide her tits. She's so fucking hot, but I have to focus. I can't be distracted by pussy right now. Instead of greeting her, I tip my head.

“What are you doing here?” she asks when she reaches me. This is not what I had in mind when I left my apartment earlier.

“Vacation.” My clipped response doesn’t go unnoticed, but that’s one thing about Grecia Harding, she doesn’t give up that easily. She’ll hang on until I’ve told her to leave me the fuck alone, and even then, she’ll act as if I want her here.

“I heard rumors that you’re not coming back,” she tells me as we walk toward the beach, closer to the water. I wish I could disappear under the current and never return. She’s right, though, I don’t want to go back. I wanted to run and not look behind me ever again.

“Maybe. Who knows what the future brings?” I don’t look at her. I want to, I crave the human connection, but I force myself to focus on the ocean instead.

She waits a beat before admitting, “Sometimes I feel like running away, too, being away from the history of our families makes it easier to think. Having Kelli so adamant about the Sovereign is tiring.” Her confession makes me stop for a moment. Finally, I glance over at her.

Grecia is everything a queen should be—poised, elegant, and beautiful.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 8:42 am

Her tanned skin is like smooth caramel, her eyes are wide, golden, and they shimmer as the sun hits them. She has perfect, pouty lips, and her slight curves make me want to feel them above me. Regal. That's what I think when I look at her.

She doesn't notice me staring, so I keep on looking at her, taking her in and watching how a small smile tilts her lips at the corners. Her gaze is locked on the water, and it seems as if she's having similar thoughts to the ones I just had a few moments ago.

"Why don't you take me on whatever adventure you're planning, and I can help you." Her suggestion almost makes me scoff. Would I really want her with me when I'm about to walk into one of the most dangerous tasks I've ever been on? "I may be female, but I can handle myself."

Her assurance makes me turn fully to her. I'd love to see her fight. Perhaps even kill someone. I don't know why, but the thought of that makes my dick hard. I've never been a manwhore like Etienne or Ares were. I choose my partners with specific intention in mind—one night—and before I take them to bed, I make sure I know everything there is to know about them. I'm not a hacker for no reason.

But if Grecia thinks she's getting love from me, she's sorely mistaken. I wouldn't mind taking a ride on the G-train if she's offering no strings.

"I guess I should say, welcome to the adventure of a lifetime?" I quirk a brow at her, waiting for her response.

"Sign me up." She winks, playfully, before shoving her shorts down those long lithe legs; she unhooks her bikini top before racing into the water with an excited squeal.

She's going to be a handful, in more ways than one.

Playlist

Demons – Jacob Lee

I Hold You – CLANN

Kill For You – Skylar Grey, Eminem

Call Out My Name – The Weeknd

Someone You Loved – Lewis Capaldi

Breathe – Mako

Saint-Tropez – Post Malone

Bruises – Lewis Capaldi

Not Your Hero – Emanuel Vo Williams

Be Alright – Dean Lewis

Hold On – Chord Overstreet

lovely – Billie Eilish, Khalid