



Little Red (Red Reign #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Red—the color of blood.

Death—thats my future.

I wished someone would save me.

For years, I searched for my place in the world, never imagining it would lead me into a shadowy underworld. A place Id rather have nothing to do with.

Then I met him, the mysterious stranger who calls me Little Red. With his arrival, my life spirals into chaos, filled with secrets, danger, and a fierce, undeniable attraction.

In this world of deceit and betrayal, can I unravel the mystery surrounding my past while trying to survive the perilous game in which I am caught?

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PROLOGUE

SIX MONTHS AGO

Death...

...that's my future.

I wished someone would save me.

I was wrong.

So very wrong.

Something unsettling burrows its way into the depths of my stomach, setting like hard cement. I pick up my pace, almost running. Footsteps sound faster behind me, the crunch of boots on dirt and snaps of twigs follow closely. He isn't quiet, his heavy breath filling me with dread.

Whipping around, I chance a look over my shoulder, and in amongst the shadows of night, under the city streets, I catch a glimpse of a large body charging at me like a bull. My breath hitches as my heart hammers, and fear swims through my veins as though it's running a marathon. My feet attempt to pick up speed as I keep running. I don't look back again.

My need to survive takes over. Here, I thought I'd gotten ahead. Only, within what feels like seconds since my glimpse of the body following me, arms wrap tightly

around my torso. His hard-as-iron grip and what breath I have left are slowly squeezed from me, but not before a deathly scream erupts from my lungs, and something hard hits me in the head.

Then nothing.

Blackness.

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The scent of wet dirt fills my nostrils, causing a fit of coughs. I attempt to open my eyes, but the throb in my head stabs me behind my eyelids. I slam them shut again, and darkness closes in around me. I squeeze my eyes closed tighter, wishing this to be a bad dream I really want to wake up from. Only a scraping sound that reminds me of nails on a chalkboard causes my breath to hitch, and I know this isn't good.

The shovel scrapes along the rocks again, and the wind is knocked out of me as pile after pile of dirt is dumped on my limp body.

The impulse to jump up and run is strong. If I did, I wouldn't make it very far, my body is still and numb.

Even the creatures of the night have fallen silent, not a single chirp from a night bird or a cricket. I'm alone—no one to save me.

Voices flow through the cold breeze, my body shakes, and I'm not sure if it's from the cold air or fear, most likely a mix of both, but leaning more toward fear.

I attempt to listen to the unfamiliar, deep, manly voices argue. "Why did you do this?" one hisses out, and the shovel pauses.

Thank goodness.

I strain my ears to hear the reply.

“Her death is payment, she must die, her family owes it to yours,” the other man growls out.

Payment? For what? I don’t owe money to anyone.

“But she’s done nothing wrong.” His voice is firm and unwavering, while the other man bellows with such power and strength it would make anyone fear him.

“Her family broke the rules, and now I’ve been left to clean up the mess.”

Family? For as long as I can remember, I’ve had no one close enough to resemble anything close to that. Growing up in the streets is not my idea of family. Trying to find my next meal or a warm place to sleep is no life for anyone, but it was mine.

A cough rips up my dirt-coated throat. I gag on it, dry retching.

“She’s alive. We have to get out of here now,” the gentle but firm voice says with urgency.

“No. She must die,” the other persists.

What could I have done to him to owe a death penalty?

“She is a nobody. Leave her alone.” The coldness in his tone sends chills down my spine.

There’s grunting, a cry of pain, followed by a shout. Then, a shot rings through the air, causing me to jump. The noise is so deafening my ears begin to ring, and I cower into myself, finally moving my arms to cover my ears.

A silence follows the obvious gunshot, and I take the chance to move a little more.

Who shot who? I could be next.

My muscles slowly unclench as I raise my body from the cold, damp dirt. I try to wipe it away from my clothes, but it doesn't work. The filth has permeated my shirt and pants and soaked through, sending a chill over my body and causing goose bumps to rise over my skin.

Luckily, the grave intended for my lifeless body is shallow, but I'm so cold my fingers are numb, and my entire body trembles. No matter how hard I try, grasping the grave's edge to get myself out is difficult. Still, somehow, I manage.

Eventually, after slipping back a few times, I hoist my exhausted body up and roll out onto the ground above my attempted early grave. With each movement, searing pain shoots through my skull, causing my stomach to roll. I clutch my arms around my stomach and groan.

A deep, throaty voice causes me to freeze. Panic claws at my chest.

"Are you all right?" Alarm bells are ringing loudly, and the urge to run is still strong.

I need to get up and out of this dirt if I'm going to survive. With slow movements, I manage to stand on my own, but not before strong hands touch my arms. I flinch, turning to defend myself and raise my hand, prepared to fight. He's quick, lashing out and gripping my wrist.

As I stare into his dark, haunting eyes, he places my hand at my side and hovers his hands at my shoulders.

His eyes roam over me, and I stand guarded, knowing I don't have the strength to move fast enough.

What is he looking for?

When his eyes stop at mine, I drop my gaze and focus on my mud-covered feet to avoid the hardness of his stare. It's like a weight holding me in place.

The darkness surrounding us makes it hard for me to see him clearly. From what I can tell, he has clean, shiny shoes, and it appears he's wearing suit pants.

He drops his hands to his sides and has yet to say a word, making the air heavy with tension.

Do I run?

Lifting his hand, it lands on my head, where he starts brushing away the leaves and picking out sticks and dirt that have found their way locked in my now matted hair. I recoil from his touch, my head remaining down. A cough pushes up my throat. "Please leave me alone. I didn't do anything wrong. I don't have any family, so I don't know why I'm being punished."

Tears sting my dirt-filled eyes, and I quickly try to rub it out, only to make it worse.

"Here." The man shoves something in front of my face.

Staring at it through blurry eyes, it looks like a piece of folded-up paper and a roll of cash. I stand there, biting my lip, unsure of what to do. When I don't move to take what he's shoved at me, he reaches down, takes my hand, presses it into my palm, and closes my numb fingers around it.

My body trembles as I await my death sentence. He could be setting me up.

"Get out of here!" he yells.

I jump, gripping the paper and money tightly. I glance down to the shallow grave one last time—a place I would never have been found.

Would I have been missed? Probably not. I don't have anyone—well, no one close to me. I've learned to keep my distance and not rely on others.

Without hesitation, I turn and run as fast as my legs will carry me through the trees. My breath is tight in my chest, but I push through the pain. Survival is an instinct I know well. Sticks stab into my bare feet, causing sharp pain to shoot up my legs.

Who was the man who killed my would-be killer? Do I really want to know? Possibly not. It might be dangerous, and instead of only running from one man's accomplices, I might be hiding from two. I need to hide and never be found. With this money, I should be able to start a new life.

I'm not sure where I'm going. I only know that I need to get away from here and hide. That man was so hell-bent on killing me, and I'm left wondering if he has others who will soon follow.

I can't stop.

I need to live.

To survive.

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PRESENT DAY

“A elina, can you get the table in the back corner for me, please?” my boss asks as she slides past me with her hands full of dirty dishes.

After checking that I have my order pad, I walk to where she gestured. Two men sit there dressed in business attire. They lean over the table, their voices hushed with quick glances around them as though they’re looking over their shoulders for some reason. I don’t miss the instant silence as I approach, their heated stares penetrating me.

My face heats as I reach their table. One of them locks eyes on me and snaps his mouth shut, his gaze sinister.

I can’t stop the shiver that runs down my spine. Something about these two men doesn’t sit right with me. A dangerous kind of energy radiates off them. Is it their quiet but angry voices? The cruel twist of lips on the man on the right as he laughs?

No.

It’s their eyes.

Those cold, fathomless eyes. Another shiver rips through me, and I plaster on a fake smile when I approach them. “What can I get for you both today?” I ask, my pen at the ready.

They simply look at me, their eyes not leaving my face.

Silence.

“I-I can come back if you’re not ready?” I stutter, the weight of their stare unnerving me.

This seems to snap them out of whatever thoughts were going through their heads. They quickly turn their attention away, holding their menus and studying them with purpose.

As I wait, I take this opportunity to consider them up close. The vibe emanating from this table brings the fear I felt six months ago to the front of my mind. It’s a night I wish not to remember, but the nightmares were never-ending until I started seeing someone about three months ago. Only then did things start to become more normal.

One of the men has dark hair, dark eyes that are cold and distant, and a face sculpted to perfection with a squared jawline. He clears his throat, drawing my attention. “Can I get a coffee and the breakfast special, please?”

Mid-order, I stop writing.

That voice .

Where have I heard it before?

Before I can collect my thoughts, the other guy speaks. “I’ll have the same, please. Coffees are both black with two sugars.”

I struggle to scribble down the orders as my hands begin to tremble.

The second guy has a face that appears angry and demands power. In his black suit pants and a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves, he's actually pretty hot—any girl's wet dream. But he puts fear into the pit of my stomach as though acid has settled there, and it has my flight senses kicking in.

The first man's face and voice—there's something about them I can't seem to shake.

“All right, I'll have the coffees out soon.”

I hightail it away from the table. Flashes of that night I nearly died play like a series of photos through my head. Since it was dark with hardly any moonlight over the dense woods, I never clearly saw the face of the guy who saved me. I heard his voice, though, and maybe I could be hearing things, but that man's voice sounds so familiar it causes the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up.

My hands tremble as I attempt to stick the order up for the chef.

After I ran away that night, I never looked back. I started fresh. There was enough money in that roll of cash to pay for an apartment and all furnished, to last a month. I found this job shortly after and have been doing much better since then.

“Excuse me, miss.”

I stiffen, slowly turning toward that familiar voice. Then I'm hit with the scent of pine, instantly reminding me of the woods.

“Uh...can I help you? Did you want to add something to your order?” The shake in my voice is noticeable, and I'm positive he can hear it.

He glances back over his shoulder toward his companion. “Everything is fine. I wanted to know if you ever looked at the piece of paper I gave you?”

Everything stops. My entire body starts trembling, and I begin backing away from the counter.

He must see the fear on my face because he rushes to say, “Don’t worry, I won’t hurt you.”

I know I shouldn’t trust him, but the gentle way he’s addressing me makes me want to know more.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lie, straightening up my apron.

He leans back. “Okay. I must have you mistaken for someone else. Here.” He slides a card and a piece of paper along the counter toward me.

Not this again .

I want to forget that night. I never opened the folded piece of paper, yet I didn’t throw it out either. I put it in a box in the back of my closet and never opened it again.

“Um...thanks. I don’t need this, though.” I push it back to him as he’s about to walk away.

He smiles, and that smile does things to my insides. “One day, you’ll need to know my name. A storm is coming, and you aren’t prepared. I suggest you figure out the puzzle. Go to the woods. There you will find your answers.”

My brows furrow in confusion. Are we speaking in riddles now? “Look, I’m sorry. I don’t know who you think I am, but I think you have me mistaken for someone else.” I place my hands on my hips, and thankfully, the chef calls out orders that need to go to my tables. “I have to get back to work. If you’ll excuse me.”

I turn to grab the plates when there's a light touch on my arm. I spin at the electrifying current pulsing through me. "Take this. You'll need it." He holds out the paper and card, and I snatch them from his hand, shoving them into my apron pocket. Then I turn my back to him, my heart racing.

My past is catching up with me. I still don't know why I was targeted that night, and to this day, I remember the man's words so clearly.

"Her family broke the rules...she must die."

As far as I'm aware, my parents left me at a hospital when I was younger, and I bounced from home to home until I was eighteen. I've had such a glamorous lifestyle that nearly ended in me getting killed for something I know nothing about.

Now, here I am at twenty-six, almost buried alive, and this guy is being all cryptic about the event in question.

After delivering the plates that were piling up, the two men's orders arrive. I don't want to go over there and be under their watchful eyes again.

Begrudgingly, I pick up the plates and take them to their table. "Miss, you forgot the coffees," the scary man says in a tone that suggests I am a useless waitress who should do her job better.

"Sorry. I'll get those for you now." I race off and get their drinks.

They dig into their meals as I walk away, but I keep turning back, staring, and the guy who spoke to me keeps looking my way. There's a kindness in his gaze but also a strength that frightens me.

I dig into my apron and pull out the card he gave me.

Hunter Wolfe.

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My head spins as I take in the name printed on the card I hold in my shaky hand. Was it the Wolfe family that tried to kill me six months ago? But he also saved my life, so I'm even more confused now.

My stomach churns at all the mixed thoughts. What could my family have possibly done to him for them to want to kill me?

I glance up at the man who gave me the card. Hunter. His dark eyes are on me, but his friend is more interested in the food on his plate. Something smashes behind me, and I jump, snapping me out of the trance Hunter seems to have put me under.

"Aelina, can you stop just standing there and do your job?" my boss snaps.

I manage to gather my thoughts. Right, coffees.

I straighten my back and take the hot drinks to them, placing them on their table. "Sorry about the wait. Enjoy your meals." With a smile, I walk away.

A part of me thinks I should be scared, but I don't want to acknowledge it. The other part is intrigued.

What does Hunter want with me, and why does he seem so interested?

I try my hardest not to look their way again as I go about my shift, but I fail miserably. Every time I try to sneak a peek, Hunter's eyes are already on me, as if he

knows what I'm thinking and searches for me at the same time I search for him.

When he and his friend finally get up and leave, I wait until they are out the door before I clear their table. Collecting the payment for their meal, I notice that I've been well overpaid—by five hundred dollars. I snatch up the money and run out the door after them.

Hunter is about to slide into a black Charger when I call out, "Hey, stop!"

He pauses and turns, a smile spreading across his face that makes me stop in my tracks. The guy he is with continues getting into the car as Hunter approaches me. "Is everything all right, miss?"

My words get lodged in my throat. "Uh ..." I hold out the five hundred dollars to give back.

Instead of taking it, he walks closer and closes my hand around the hundred-dollar bills. "They're yours. You'll need them when you finally decide to look at the papers I've given you."

I bite my lip. "I really think you must have me mistaken for someone else. I'm no one of importance to you or your family."

His eyes widen, and he steps closer to me. His woodsy cologne wraps around me, causing butterflies to stir in my stomach. "What do you know of my family, Red?"

Why is he calling me that? I step away from him, trying to break the spell he seems to be putting on me.

My brows furrow. "Nothing I guess."

Again, he moves closer. “Red, there’s so much you don’t understand. There’s a whole new world waiting for someone who doesn’t know their worth. Someone who is the greatest threat to my family. ” His lip curls.

“Then why are you bothering with me? Like I said, I’m no one of importance.”

Hunter leans into me, his breath on my neck. “You’re someone who can change so much. Trust me.” He pulls back and holds my gaze like his eyes are trying to burn something into my soul.

Now, I’m more confused. “What are you talking about?”

Just as Hunter’s mouth opens, the diner door opens. “Aelina, you’re about to lose your job if you don’t come in here and get back to what I pay you to do. Work, ” my boss yells, her face turning a different shade of red.

Damn, I better go.

But I have so many questions. This guy is talking in riddles.

“Yes, sorry. I was just returning something to this customer.” I don’t turn and look at my boss. I want to stay here and delve into the world that I apparently don’t know.

“Well, hurry up, or you’ll have no job at the end of your shift,” she barks out and disappears back inside.

“Please tell me what you know,” I beg, desperately wanting to know what he meant. “And why are you calling me Red?”

He pushes his hand into his suit pants pocket. “That’s your name.”

“What does that even mean? My name is Aelina. Stop playing these games with me, Mr. Wolfe.”

He chuckles. “Don’t worry, Aelina. Your answers will come soon.”

I release a frustrated breath. It’s obvious I’m not going to get the answers I want, so I turn and head back inside to finish my shift.

Only now, I’m left with so many unanswered questions.

* * *

When I arrive home close to ten p.m., all I want to do is find that box with the original piece of paper in it. So I go to my closet and push boxes aside on the top shelf. There, sitting behind everything, is the small box I put the note in. Reaching up on my tiptoes, I lean in and grab it.

Walking through my apartment, I take in everything I’ve done for myself with the money that was thrown in my lap. I live a simple life. Everything I own is secondhand. Never once have I owned anything brand new. Thrift shops are my best friends. My couch is cheap leather, and my body sticks to it in the hot months. It’s not a pleasant feeling. But I’ve tried to make it my own. I have colorful cushions on the couch and throw blankets I’ve found at the thrift store to bring some life in here.

I pull out the piece of paper given to me tonight from my little handbag. Then I sit on my couch while my heart pounds as I stare at the box that contains secrets. I could easily put the new addition into the box and walk away, forgetting what Hunter said tonight.

Am I ready to go down the rabbit hole?

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The clasp on the box creaks as I unlatch it. Lifting the lid, there sits the original folded piece of paper. I reach in and take it out, slowly opening it. There's a name neatly written in the middle that makes no sense.

Grandmother .

What the hell is this about? Six months ago, this would have meant nothing to me, and it means nothing to me now. I put it aside and unfold the newest piece of paper. The same name is there. Grandmother. Only this time, there's a phone number. I pull out Hunter's card to see if it's the same as his, but it's not.

What is he getting at?

I'm left with a heap of questions I am not sure I want the answers to.

But that's the thing about rabbit holes—once you start down them, you can't seem to stop. I put Hunter's number in my phone, typing him a message.

Do you like playing little games? I opened your notes, and neither of them makes sense.

My hand hovers over the 'send' button. Finally, I hit it, curiosity getting the best of me. A part of me wants the answers. If I were smart, I'd leave it alone and walk away.

I'm risking ending up in a grave again. Only this time, there won't be a savior to rescue me from that hell.

I stand from my couch, confused and frustrated, and go to my bedroom to get ready for a shower. My phone pings, alerting me to a message and making me pause in the bathroom doorway. I glance at my cell but choose to shower first.

When I turn on the hot water, a mist swirls around me, embracing me like a warm hug. It fills the room, causing the mirror to fog up as I adjust the heat to the right level. A cascade of water caresses my worn-out body, and I slowly edge myself to the bottom of the shower, the heaviness of today weighing on me.

My thoughts turn to Hunter.

What could he possibly want with me?

Earlier today, I looked into his dark, whiskey-colored eyes. They weren't scary. They were cautious, as if he was always on the lookout, waiting for something to go wrong. Maybe in his world, things do.

I should stay away from him, but an invisible wire pulls me toward him. I'm a puppet on a set of strings, and he is moving and making me his toy.

I scrub away the day and climb out of the shower, wrapping a towel around my body. Pulling the door open, I freeze immediately. Something is off. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It's as though a rock has been lodged in the pit of my stomach. As I stare out the bathroom door, I am sure I left the lights on, and I know I locked the apartment as I walked in tonight. It's instinct.

Perhaps it's a power outage?

No, because the bathroom light would have gone out as well.

I step out of the light, and a familiar scent hits my nostrils. Pine. It's him —it has to be.

"Hunter?" I whisper into the darkness.

My heart pounds against my ribs as I catch a dark figure moving on my couch. I step back toward the bathroom, ready to shut the door.

"Stop." The sound of the familiar, powerful voice—it's like a brick wall has been built behind me, stopping me from backing away.

My hand clutches my towel in the hopes it stays in place. Now, my heart races for a different reason. The way my body reacts to this man's voice isn't something I've experienced before, and it shouldn't be reacting this way. It's an inappropriate time. That same part of me telling me to move on from this entire situation tells me to run far away from this man because he's dangerous.

The only thing is that being dangerous is what makes him so appealing.

I stalk toward the light switches.

"Don't turn them on. No one can know that I've come to you. It's for your safety and also mine."

"I need to get dressed. I've just had a shower."

He clears his throat. "I'm not stopping you from going to your room. I only ask that you keep the light off out here. This meeting must remain secret."

I could lock myself in my room and wait for him to leave. Would he leave? I don't think he would. He seems to be a man who is in control and gets what he wants.

What if he's trying to get close to me only to take me and finish what he started?

He did save me, though. Perhaps he's trying to protect me.

My body trembles at the thought of getting dirt tossed on me in a shallow grave again. The mere thought of being buried alive causes fear to claw at my insides. The pulsing from my heart in my ears is a solid reminder that I'm okay. I'm alive.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you," he assures me.

Was it a lucky guess that he presumed I was freaking out?

Or something more?

I make my way to my bedroom. "Here we go again, speaking in riddles. Is this some kind of game you're playing with me? Trying to kill me again, are you?" I swallow the concrete lump which has formed in my throat.

"Get dressed, and then we can talk."

I shut the door behind me and quickly dig out some clothes from my dresser. Pulling on some underwear, followed by black sweatpants and a plain pink loose tank top, I suck in a breath before pulling the door open.

His pine scent has taken over my living room. I flick off the bedroom light to keep the light from filling the living room, and I can just make out his figure sitting on my couch. Thankfully, the light coming through the windows is enough to make sure I don't stub my toe on anything.

Since I only have one couch, and he's currently occupying one side of it, I sit at the opposite end, unsure if he will lunge at me with something. Although I'm sure if that was his intent, he would have done it when I was in the shower.

"Don't worry, Red. I won't hurt you." His voice is low and smooth, sending a thrill right through me.

"What are you doing here, and how did you get in? I lock up every time I come through the door."

I hear him chuckle and wish I could see his face. I'm not sure he smiles much. "I know the owner of your building."

Oh, here we go. "Let me guess, you're the owner of this particular building?" My wisecrack earns me another laugh.

"No. Really, the owner is a friend, and he let me in."

My stomach twists and not in a good way. An anxious sensation crawls up my throat.

"You said it's not safe for you to be here or something. What's all that about?" Nervousness laces my voice.

Hunter suddenly shifts in his seat, and I bolt upright. He reaches out, catching my wrist as a scream gets caught in my throat. "I'm not going to hurt you. You didn't respond to my messages, so I got worried and came to you. That's why I'm here."

My body relaxes slightly, but I can't shake the unease I feel within me.

I pull myself from his grip and stay standing. "Do you realize I could just call the police and have you arrested for breaking and entering?"

He scoffs. “You could try.” He sighs, then continues, “Red, will you sit down and let me talk to you for a moment? You want answers, don’t you?”

I nod but then realize he can’t see me. “Yes.”

He taps the couch, and I hesitantly sit, huddling myself into the corner to keep my distance. I watch his dark silhouette, analyzing it, trying to figure out if he’s about to pounce and kill me.

“Now, Red, this story isn’t a happy one. It’s full of death and betrayal. The betrayal coming from your family and why my family is out to kill yours.”

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“What?” I shout. I snatch my cell off the coffee table, my hands trembling, my breaths coming fast. “I knew it. You’re a liar. You are here to kill me.”

My shaking finger tries to dial 911. As I’m about to press the call button, the phone is pulled from my grip. I race around the other side of my couch, my legs moving fast toward my bedroom.

Strong arms wrap around me, and I release a scream. Immediately, a large hand covers my mouth. Lifting my feet, I try pushing Hunter off with my weight. It does nothing. He doesn’t even budge.

“Will you stop? I told you I’m not here to hurt you. If anything, I need your help.” He growls into my ear from behind.

I lift my arm and jab it back hard and fast, right into his ribs. He grunts, releasing me, and my body crumbles to the floor. I crawl away and press my back against the wall. “Why would you tell me your family is out to kill me and then tell me you’re not here to hurt me? That’s a little contradictory, don’t you think?” I wrap my arms around my chest, trying to catch my breath.

Hunter paces in front of me. His hand moves to his face and swipes it down in what I assume is frustration. Then he stops and looks at me. “I guess that wasn’t smart on my behalf. Perhaps I should go. I’m sorry to have scared you. Trust me when I say I’m not out to harm you in any way. I need you more than you know.” A light from the street catches his face as he speaks, and his eyes soften.

He needs me.

I'm sure my eyes just popped out of my head. That doesn't sound right. I don't know this guy.

"Why would you need me? " I slowly get back up and stay against the wall, putting about six feet between us. The streetlights' yellow glow cast shadows along his features, making his chiseled face seem more mysterious and intriguing.

His brow furrows deeply, and concern etches across his face as he steps closer, closing the distance between us. "As I've said, you're important to people. Yes, my family runs the underworld, but both of our families did at one stage."

This entire situation makes no sense.

"But I don't even have a family. They left me at a hospital when I was a baby. Why would I be punished for their mistakes?"

He has to be wrong!

He shakes his head. "Aelina, my grandmother knows yours. They've been friends for years and still are, in fact. Only now they have to keep their friendship secret because of the rivalry between our families."

His words start to sink in. I have a grandmother. My breath shakes. "How do you know I'm the right person?"

Stepping closer again, he whispers, "Because it was your grandmother who took you away from your parents. She didn't want to see you brought up in that world. It destroys people."

There's a hardness in his eyes, but I hold his gaze. "You seem to be doing all right."

Hunter's hand reaches out. I turn my head away, but it doesn't stop him from brushing the hair off my cheek. His fingertips glide across the sensitive skin of my face, and then they are gone.

My body begs for more, but my mind tells me he could still be a murderer.

My murderer.

"I am a male. Males are raised as fighters, to be strong, to be leaders. Women..." He sighs, then continues, "Women are used to pay for things if debts aren't paid off. Sometimes they don't survive."

I turn back toward him. I didn't realize how much closer he'd come. He must have come closer when I turned away. His breath hits my exposed shoulder, and goose bumps rise over my body.

"But if my family were people in charge, just like yours are, wouldn't I have been spared?" A new fear settles in my bones, causing my blood to run cold.

Hunter shakes his head again. "It's not that simple, Aelina. You see, because of what your grandmother did, it put your family in trouble. They had a debt, or I should say a promise they couldn't fulfill because you'd disappeared."

"Wouldn't my parents have seen me on the news and spoken out or come to collect me?" My voice cracks, and Hunter's hand cups my cheek. I close my eyes while tears fill them. I don't want to know this.

"Aelina, look at me."

Reluctantly, I open my eyes, taking in his square jaw. He has short stubble growing—something I hadn't noticed at the diner earlier. "I'm not sure what you're thinking, but your grandmother did what she had to because she loved you then and still does now. She didn't want you to be caught up in anything or killed. Only one night six months ago, one of my family's men recognized you. You look so much like your mother, the spitting image. When he came to me and told me what he was about to do, I raced to save you. That man ended up in the grave, which was meant for you."

Fear paralyzes me. Clearing my throat, I question, "How do you know about me?"

Hunter lets his hand drop, and I miss his touch already. I shouldn't be lusting over this man whose family is out to kill me. For all I know, he could be lying, and he does have plans to hurt me.

"My granny told me about your grandmother. She would tell me all the stories of our families and how close we were. Then kids came along, and thankfully, I never had sisters, or they would have probably had a terrible life. Fortunately for your parents, their firstborn was a boy, but then they had you. A couple of days after you were born, my granny and your grandmother plotted to take you away. That, of course, made my parents furious because a deal was struck between families. They thought your parents had hidden you. My parents wouldn't listen. So that's where the rift began."

"I have a brother? Is he alive?"

Hunter nods, and I don't miss the solemn glint in his eyes.

My knees become weak, and I feel myself falling. I don't hit the floor as Hunter scoops me up and takes me back to the living room. Inhaling his woodsy scent somewhat calms me.

I wish he would tell me what he wants, but now I have so many more questions. I can't even begin to sort through everything poured over me like a bucket of ice-cold water tonight.

Hunter puts me down, slowly easing his arms away from me. Why does being here with him feel right but also very wrong? I should be running or hiding from this man, though I'm sure he'd probably find me again. He is no one to me. Yet, the way he talks to and comforts me, it's as if he's been in my life forever. Maybe the small connection between us is the fact that he saved my life, not ending it like he probably should have.

He moves gracefully and sits back on the couch beside me, then slowly turns. "Aelina, you have two brothers and two sisters."

My heart skips a beat, and my mouth hangs open. "What? Are they all part of the 'family business,' as you would call it?"

Hunter's eyes become sad. "No. One of your brothers is alive, and the other was killed about a year ago. Your sisters got the same treatment as you. Put into hiding. Only your grandmother knows where they are. She gave them to families who couldn't have children and were no part of the life your parents chose."

I lean forward over the couch, my head falling into my hands. "This is too much. Why are you here now? What could I possibly do?"

My chest tightens. My breathing becomes heavy. Slowly, I breathe in through my nose and out my mouth. The last thing I need right now is to have a panic attack.

"Your brother, Nash, who was killed, was the oldest, which means he was basically running things alongside your father."

I lift my head and look at him. “Wait, stop. Are my parents alive?” Even I hear the hopeful plea in my words.

I’m not sure if having them alive is a good or bad thing.

“I believe your mother is, but no one has seen your father in a long time. I’m talking years.”

“What’s happened to my mother?”

“Nothing. She is in hiding, thanks to your grandmother. Your brother, Nash, was running things until...”

“He was killed.” I finish his sentence for him. Hunter nods, a somber expression resting across his face.

It’s amazing how my eyes have adjusted to such little light, and I can see him so clearly now.

I want to cry.

This is all too much.

Silence fills the room while I process the information overload I’ve received. As I think about it, something clicks. Running my fingers through my damp hair, I question, “So you’re telling me that because my older brother has been killed, it’s a chance for me to step in and take his place?”

“Yes.” He leans back and folds his arms across his chest.

“And you’re here because?” I leave the question hanging.

“I’m here to claim what’s mine.”

6

“I ’m sorry, what?” I shake my head.

Hunter stands from the couch. “Like I said, I’ve come to claim what’s mine.”

I jerk my head back. “I was right then. You’re here to kill me and keep the underworld for yourself. Newsflash...” I stab my finger at my chest, “... I don’t want it. I’d rather be as far away from it as humanly possible.”

My body trembles as I stand. I’m attempting to put on a determined face because, if I’m being honest with myself, I am scared out of my mind. I don’t want any of this. I didn’t ask Hunter to save my life months ago. Right now, my lifeless body could be buried beneath the bitterly cold dirt, rotting away with no one any the wiser.

Hunter chuckles. “Oh, Red, I wasn’t only promised the underworld, I was promised something else. Something that will help end all this violence between our families.”

I fold my arms across my chest, my curiosity piqued. “What is it then?”

His dark eyes narrow, the air between us thickening. “You.”

I hold up my hands, stopping him from saying anything else. “Wait...me? I was promised to you?”

Hunter shoves his hands in his pockets. “Yes.”

“What the hell? I can’t be promised to you. I don’t know you. I don’t want anything to do with this.” My voice becomes louder with each word spoken.

“Red, the power we hold together, standing strong as one, is what our families need .” He steps toward me, but I move back.

“Don’t come any closer. You need to leave. I will not be yours. I’m no one’s. I don’t even know who the hell I am now.”

Hunter takes a step closer. “Red...”

“Don’t call me that! My name is Aelina Beaumont, and you are no one to me. As far as I’m concerned, this conversation never happened.” I pull my shoulders back, standing taller. “Leave. Now. ”

“Aelina, you have to understand. You don’t get a say in this matter. You will be mine. It may not be right now because I’m a decent person, but if my father finds out that I know where you are and you won’t agree to be mine...” He takes a deep breath, swallowing hard. His eyes darken even further than I’d thought possible. Tension rolls through the air in waves, and the confidence I felt moments ago is starting to evaporate with just one hard look from Hunter. “Aelina, if you don’t agree to be mine, you will die.”

I gasp, my hand shooting to my mouth as I step back. He rushes forward and reaches for me as I back up against the wall. “Go to your grandmother. She can give you all the information you need.”

My body ignites as anger fills me. I point my finger directly in Hunter’s face, stepping closer this time, my confidence returning. “You do not get to dictate anything to me. As far as I know, I have no family. They didn’t want me.” I throw my hands in the air in frustration. “Matter settled. I don’t belong to you or anyone.”

Hunter moves so fast, snatching my upper arms in his hands before I can breathe. I open my mouth to scream, but he presses his lips over mine.

The instant his lips are on mine, something in me changes. There are sparks, an energy inside me, something I didn't know was there or could even exist between two strangers. My body relaxes, and the anger I was feeling a moment ago dies like the flame it was. In its place is a new calmness, where butterflies swarm my stomach in a fluttering wave of euphoria. My eyes close, and I relish his kiss, my body melting into his against my better judgment.

My head screams at me to pull away. I should slap him. To do anything other than be lost in this painfully perfect moment. Instead, I allow Hunter to devour my mouth. A low moan escapes me. Then, as fast as his tongue begins tasting mine, he's gone.

The instant his lips leave me, the tingling stops, and I'm left wanting. I pant heavily, craving his taste, but I am left in the darkness as he pulls away.

"You can deny me all you want, but know, you will be mine. I can see it in your eyes. I'm not an evil person. You know how to find me, and you know how to find your grandmother. It's time to decide what you want...answers or death. It's only a matter of time before another member of my family finds you."

He doesn't give me a chance to respond before he walks out the front door, and I'm left with my head spinning. I race to lock the door behind him, then collapse onto the couch. My eyes close, and I allow the darkness to swallow me up.

* * *

My reflection stares back at me as I stand in front of the window of a dress shop. My clothes are covered in dirt, and dark streaks are smeared over my tear-stained face.

I'm alive.

I could have been murdered.

That grave was meant for me.

I hold out my hand, which clutches a roll of money and a piece of paper. I stuff the paper back into my pocket and unroll the money. Counting it, I discover it's in bundles of one thousand, and there are ten of them.

Ten thousand dollars.

How is this possible?

I quickly glance over both my shoulders to make sure the man isn't following me. Thankfully, he's not.

Tall buildings and shop windows remain dark and stand silent in the blackness of the night. I turn in a full circle, trying to discover where I am. This part of town is the dirtiest. Even as I think it, a rustling of rubbish rolls past me. I need to move and get out of this area, especially with this amount of money. I'll surely be killed if I'm caught by someone with this kind of cash on me.

My legs pump as hard as they can and don't stop, no matter how tired they are. Suddenly, the echo of screeching tires startles me.

The sound of my phone ringing pulls me from my nightmare. Groaning, I rub the dried sleep from my eyes. It's been a while since I dreamed about that night. It's like I was reliving the moment once again.

My thoughts turn to last night.

Was it a dream?

Reaching over, I grab my cell. An unknown number lights up the screen, and I don't answer numbers like that. It's most likely a telemarketer, so I press the decline button, sending them to voicemail.

I pull my achy body upright. "This couch is not for sleeping," I mumble, tilting my head to either side and stretching out my stiff neck.

My phone rings again. Leaning over, I look, and it's the same number.

"What is going on with this number?" I mutter as I press the 'accept' button. "Hello?" I make sure whoever it is can hear my pissed-off tone.

Nothing.

Silence.

"Hello?" I say again, waiting a few seconds. Still, no response. Irritated, I hang up. "Stupid people." I glance at the time on my phone— ten a.m. I have plenty of time to get some schoolwork done before I have to go to work at lunchtime for another late shift.

Glancing at my phone's screen, I notice I have missed calls and unread messages. I don't recognize the number, but it's different from the one who called me a moment ago.

Hunter:

They will make sense in time. You need to go to the woods, and there you will receive your answers.

Hunter:

Aelina, are you there? Are you all right?

There are no more messages, just phone calls from Hunter's number. "So it wasn't a dream." All the dots start clicking together from the conversation last night with Hunter, and a sense of dread washes over me.

A horn blares outside my window, and I scream, turning toward the sound, my heart now pulsing in my throat.

Getting up, I shuffle to my little coffee machine and add my favorite rich caffeinated pod. I need the pick-me-up to get me going this morning.

How can I be a part of some big underworld family? What the hell do underworld families do? There better not be vampires or something because that would just be messed up.

My phone rings again, and I race over to where I left it, sitting on the small coffee table—the same number as earlier. An overwhelming sense of dread fills me. My hands begin to shake, and I pick up my vibrating phone. "What do you want?"

Silence.

Then I hear it.

Breathing.

"Who is this? I can hear you."

Another car horn outside my apartment blasts, but it also comes through the other end

of the call. The pit in my stomach falls.

The caller is outside.

“I’m going to hang up now and call the police,” I yell, unable to hide the fear in my voice.

“So you are alive ...”

“What do you mean? Who are you?” I cry out, walking over to the window that points out to the street.

Keeping myself shielded by the curtain, I see a tall man standing across the road holding something, which I’m guessing is a cell phone to his ear. He’s wearing a black jacket with his collar pulled up. I can’t see his face since he’s looking down.

“I’ve been looking for you, Little Red.”

My blood turns to ice. Hunter called me Red. My focus stays on the figure out front. “I’m not sure who you think I am, but I’m not that person,” I bite back, attempting to mask my fear.

“Oh, dear daughter, you have a debt to settle for me.”

Daughter? Then, the figure lifts his head, staring directly at me. His eyes bore right through my window and into my soul.

I know this man—at least, I think I do—dark hair, dark haunting eyes, his face gaunt and unkempt.

I quickly pull the phone away from my ear, end the call, and dial the police. The man stands there for a moment, simply staring up at my window. Then, he shoves his hands into his jacket pockets, tipping his head slightly, and walks down the street, not turning back.

My finger hovers over the ‘call’ button. The police won’t help me . For all I know, they are in someone else’s pocket who wants me dead.

I went to them when my close call happened, and all they did was take a report. They didn’t believe me because I was a girl on the streets. I’ll never forget the look on their faces and the snide smirks that made me not even tell them the whole story.

I’ve always been good at running. Hiding even. Since my near-death experience, I have moved three times and worked at three different diners.

Time to move.

Slowly, I back away from the window and race to my bedroom, frantically pulling out my suitcase and a duffel bag that I know fits all my belongings. Pulling all my drawers open, I throw what little I have into it. In the bathroom, I put everything back into my toiletry bag, which sits on the bathroom sink as a ‘just in case.’

I can’t believe I’m having to move again. Fear seizes my chest as I think back on the phone call from the man who called me his daughter—it made my blood run as cold as ice. The family I don’t know sounds messed up and dangerous, not people I want to be associated with. Then there’s Hunter. I’m not sure what to make of him yet. There’s a side of him that intrigues me and makes me want to know more, but I don’t like how he thinks he’s going to own me.

A sharp knock at the door startles me. The eyeshadow palette in my hands clatters to the floor at my feet. A rainbow of eyeshadow colors spills around me—blues, purples, and grays. But I can’t move.

Another loud bang finally ignites a fire in me to stir a little, cautiously walking to the door. Unsettled, I stop a couple of feet from it. “Who is it?” I yell.

“Me.” My heart leaps, and I move to unlock it in an instant.

Hunter stands there, his brow furrowed. His hooded eyes trace my entire body as though he’s taking me in, like he’s checking to make sure I’m okay. His gaze moves behind me, then he steps through the doorway, gently pushing past me.

This time, Hunter’s not alone. The guy he was with at the diner walks in behind him. He doesn’t look at me. His focus is on my apartment.

“What’s happened? I saw you at your window, and you appeared worried.” Hunter’s voice is panicked, but there’s also a hint of concern.

He stops peering through the window I was just standing at and approaches me. He’s not in the same suit as he was last night. This navy blue suit brings out the warm brown of his eyes. When he stops in front of me, his hand comes up and brushes the hair from my face. My eyes instantly close at his gentle touch, but it is also dark, mysterious, and in some way, threatening. “What happened?” he asks again.

My eyes flick open. “I...ah...I...”

“Aelina, I’m not the bad guy here. You’ve got to know this.”

I shake my head and frown, taking a step back. “I don’t even know you. I was hoping our chat last night was a dream, yet here you are once again,” I yell, pointing at him.

“Landon, I think it’s clear,” he calls to the other guy roaming around my small apartment.

My focus shifts to him where he stands by the couch. My gaze goes to my room of its own accord, a space I really hope they don’t check. If they do, they’ll see my suitcase splayed open and everything I own shoved in.

Hunter must notice, and it dawns on me that nothing gets past him. “Landon, check in there,” he directs, pointing to my bedroom.

He moves to head in that direction, and I quickly step in front of him. “No,” I demand.

Landon looks between Hunter and me, confusion passing across his features.

Hunter crosses his arms over his chest. “Why? What are you hiding? And you still haven’t told me what’s got you upset.”

I jolt back defensively. “I’m not upset. I’m angry.” I stomp my foot. “I hate that you’ve just shown up and think you own me.” I release a breath. “Because you don’t.”

Hunter’s eyes don’t leave mine, and I stand my ground in front of the doorway to my bedroom. “Landon, can you please give us a moment?”

“Yes, sir.” His voice is stone-cold and menacing.

Panic sets in, making my skin prickle with goose bumps.

Once Landon leaves the room, which I assume is to wait outside the front door in case I attempt to run, Hunter takes my shoulders and moves my entire body away from the door. “Don’t do that. Stop being a dick and bossing me around,” I snap, following him as he walks into my bedroom.

He stares down at my full suitcase on the floor, and I can’t help the sigh that escapes my lips. He looks at me through narrowed eyes.

“Where are you planning to go?” His voice is calm and controlled.

All I want to do is yell and scream at him to get out of my life so I can disappear.

I didn't ask for any of this.

"Away from you." I shrug, my tone surprisingly calm.

"You do realize no amount of running will save you from me."

I raise my eyebrows and scoff out a mocking laugh. "I didn't realize I needed to be saved. As far as I'm concerned, I belong to no one."

Hunter chuckles, and it causes my stomach to twist with excitement. "Oh, Little Red, if only you knew everything."

I lean against my bedroom wall. "What else can you tell me about my father?" I blurt out.

Hunter shrugs. "I don't know much. I haven't been told a lot about him. All I know is he hasn't been seen in a while. If my father catches wind of him being alive, he will die."

A coolness comes over my face as the blood drains from it.

Hunter takes two large steps and stands in front of me. The familiar woodsy smell fills my nose and calms my now jittery nerves. "Is that who was talking to you on the phone in the window?"

I swallow the concrete lump that's formed in my throat and slowly nod.

"Dammit!" he yells.

Hunter's outburst startles me so much that my body crumbles to the floor. My head falls to my knees, and my hands come over my head. It's not a physical blow, but my body is trying to protect itself on instinct.

Within seconds, Hunter's hand is on the back of my neck. His thumb rubs small movements, providing a tiny comfort. "I'm sorry for scaring you. That wasn't my intention. I'm angry with myself that I couldn't keep you safe and your father found you." He releases a heavy breath before continuing. "He's a tyrant, a dominant man who lives to rule by fear and intimidation. He's a monster. It wouldn't surprise me if he actually killed your brother, Nash."

I tremble at the thought of someone so vile and evil killing their own blood, someone who was a part of their life. I feel Hunter press his lips to my head, and my stomach swarms with butterflies.

Lifting my head, I stare into the eyes of the man I was apparently promised to. "Hunter, why are you coming for me now? Why not just take me with you when you saved my life? I probably would have had less fight then, considering I was almost killed, and you saved me." I give a small smile.

His hand stays on the back of my neck but stops moving. "I need you with a fight in your belly. I need you on my side to take over the underworld and push my father out. I don't want any of my brothers to take the lead. Otherwise, they'll be worse than my father. Right now, I'm mostly in charge and can run things how I want, but if my father asks for something, it has to be done because he hasn't 'fully' handed it over."

My eyes widen, and my heart jumps into my throat. I hesitantly ask, “Are you trying to wipe out your own family?”

Hunter stands, and I follow his movements. His expensive shoes track back and forth on the carpet in my bedroom. Staring at the floor, he says, “It’s not that simple.”

“Well, of course not. It’s your family.” I laugh nervously,, but how ironic is it that he wants to take out his family and mine? This makes no sense.

“No, what I mean is, they worship my father and what he stands for. Everything bad. Everyone dies around me. I can’t get close to anyone without him killing them off. I’m the eldest, but he has this hold over me for some strange reason, and my brothers do whatever he deems necessary. If I remove him from the situation, then perhaps I could change things...” He pauses for a moment and looks down at me. “We could find the rest of your siblings, and they would be safe. No harm would come to them, but that’s only if I can remove my father from his throne. You and your family are the threat he doesn’t want.”

Things are starting to fall into place, but I still have so many questions. “I’m still not seeing how I have a part to play. Okay, I was apparently promised to you, and you keep saying I can help. But how?”

I slowly push myself off the floor and walk toward him, resting my hand on his arm. His suit is the softest material I’ve ever felt. Not the right time to think about something like that.

Hunter turns to face me. “Me and you would bring our families together, giving us power over both. Your remaining brother would have to take his orders from you and me. Same with my family. Together, we could remove my father.”

His words slowly sink in.

“I’m not strong enough for this world...your world, and I don’t want to be a part of it.”

He takes my shoulders. “You’re stronger than you know. But you must understand that the world you’re about to be introduced to isn’t one with fairies and princesses. It’s full of death, blood, and betrayal.”

My body tingles with fear, but I can’t ignore the mix of curiosity that follows. “I’ve never even shot a gun. I’m not sure I could kill someone. That’s not who I am.”

His hands rub up and down my arms, then slide down, taking mine. Goose bumps cover my skin at his gentle touch. Why does he have this effect on me? I don’t know the man, yet I’m ready to throw myself at him and his crazy plan.

But I’m no killer.

“Little Red, when you’re done with your training, you’ll be ready for anything.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Training?”

Hunter nods. “Yes. When you do decide to go to your grandmother’s, you’ll get everything you need.”

“Pfft. What do you think I am? One of Charlie’s Angels who can fight? That’s not me. I don’t know how many times I must spell it out for you. You have the wrong girl,” I yell the last part in his face and take a step back from him. To his credit, he doesn’t flinch, only watches. I can’t help but wonder what’s going through his mind.

Am I just a pawn in this game of chess he has going on?

Without a word, he walks away, zipping up the bag and suitcase I was in the middle

of packing before they showed up, and grabs the rest of my toiletries. Surprisingly, he says nothing while gathering my things.

My mouth hangs open as I watch him place it on the floor in front of me.

“If you want to leave, then go. I won’t follow you. But I can’t promise your safety, especially now that I know your father is in town and knows you’re alive.”

I hesitate, stalling as Hunter’s words play over in my mind. I’m about to take my suitcase when I finally ask, “Will my father kill me?”

He reaches for my hand and squeezes, offering comfort. “No. He will take you to my father because he is in debt, and I’m not sure if he will kill you despite your father or if something else will happen. I can never know what’s going through my father’s mind. Even on days when I think he’s in a good mood, he’ll literally shoot the messenger if they bring bad news. Can you guess what happened to the people who delivered the information about you and your sisters being gone?”

I shudder to think. Those poor people died because of my family.

“Hunter, I can’t do this.” I release his hands, grabbing my suitcase.

“Please reconsider.” He takes my arm. “I fear I won’t be able to protect you from our fathers.”

Tension fills the room. My heart pounds at the thought of a cold and slow death. The way Hunter stares at me makes me pause. My stomach twists in knot upon knot, painfully wrenching my stomach and making me gasp.

“I can’t.” My voice trembles.

Standing in this room that's been my home, my safe place for the last couple of months, I can't believe it's all about to fall apart because Hunter decided it was time for me to know the truth. I could have continued to live my life without knowing everything I do now.

Grabbing my suitcase, I wheel it out to the living area. I pause, taking my now lukewarm coffee into the kitchen and pouring it into my travel mug. Hunter silently follows me, watching my every move.

With my back to him, I say, "Since you know someone in the building, could you please take care of everything here? I know I shouldn't expect you to do anything for me, but this entire situation is all your fault. You decided to come back into my life when I was content and happy with how I was."

Closing my eyes, I sense movement behind me. Then, all of a sudden, heat presses against my back. The change in temperature causes an involuntary shiver to race down my spine.

At least, that's what I tell myself is the cause of it.

"I'm sorry. I wanted to try to make things better for everyone whose lives are in danger. Now that your father knows you're alive, you're not safe. He'll be watching you. Waiting for you to be alone. Aelina, you're not going to last long without my protection." His breath hits my hair, which falls over my neck and shoulders, sending a shiver through me.

His warm hand comes up and brushes it to one side, placing it over one shoulder. Soft lips press to the bare skin now exposed around my neck, and my breath catches, my heart rate rising with each kiss Hunter places on my flesh. Tilting my head to the side, I give him access, wanting more. Needing more.

His kiss intensifies, and he sucks gently as his lips move. My breath becomes heavy, and the desire building is at war with my mind. I need to go. I need to walk. No, run out that door and never look back. But this man makes me want him in so many ways that I want to throw all caution to the wind.

Who the hell falls for the bad guy, someone they hardly know? I don't want to be that person so easily manipulated.

"Little Red..." he whispers, and I have to bite my lip from whimpering.

My legs become like Jell-O, and I curse my body for its reaction. A heady want pulses through me, an electric current passing between us, pulling us together as if we're stronger together than apart. His breath is ragged. His hand snakes around my waist, pulling my body flush against his. Desire burns between us.

There's something here I really want to explore. The more Hunter inserts himself into my life, the easier he makes it for me to be interested in him, even if my body and brain fight against each other.

He slips his hand under my tank top, pressing against the bare skin of my stomach. In one swift move, he spins me around to face him. The desire in his eyes is evident, his pupils dilated. Without warning, he leans down, devouring my mouth.

The wind is knocked from me, and I decide I don't need to breathe as long as his lips are on mine.

I ache for him, for more of his touch, to taste him again and again.

Hunter pulls back, his eyes boring into mine. "Don't go. I want what is mine... you."

I hold my breath at his words. "I'm not yours. You can't claim me."

“I can, and I plan to, Little Red.” He practically growls.

The truth in those words hits me in my core. Could this entire situation be a moment of weakness caused by lust between us? There is a connection, like an invisible cord pulling us together, but still, this could be a terrible idea.

“As much as I want to say yes, the stubborn part of me tells me to run away as fast as I can,” I admit.

Hunter’s arms tighten around my waist, holding me against him. I rest my hands on his firm chest and play with a button on his crisp white shirt, not wanting to meet his gaze.

Hunter sighs. “If you want to go, I won’t stop you. You have your grandmother’s phone number and mine. I will walk out that door now and never return if that’s what you truly want.”

I glance up at him.

He’s giving me what I want.

I push away from the security of his embrace. His demeanor changes from the soft, wanting, and gentle man he was while holding me into the cutthroat leader of the underworld that he is.

I clutch my hands at my chest, coldness seeping from my heart through my lungs like a morning frost settling over my body.

“I want to go.”

9

Loneliness settles into the pit of my empty stomach as I walk out of my apartment, wheeling my suitcase behind me. During the last six months, I've saved as much as I could in case something ever came up.

Leaving Hunter in my apartment was hard. I needed to do it, though. I don't want to be a part of what he's offering. I'm sure there's something between us. It was overwhelming, the way he made me feel secure, not lonely, as though I had someone on my side, and best of all, he wanted to keep me safe from my family and his.

He isn't a monster. At least, I hope he isn't.

I could be very wrong, though.

Stopping on the sidewalk outside my building, I don't know where I'm going. I left with no plan, no direction.

I grab my purse, digging for my journal. I started it six months ago, keeping pictures of places I'd like to go. Opening it, the first place that pops up is New York. But instantly, my internal alarm bell starts ringing.

Isn't that like the crime capital of the States or something like that?

However, it's only a couple of hours away, and it's a start. I need to start fresh, and I'm sure I can find somewhere safe in the surrounding towns.

* * *

While I sit at the bus station waiting to board, I put some sort of plan together in my mind—find a halfway house or backpack and hide out until things settle down.

Pulling out my phone, I scroll through news articles about crimes I should be aware of, and a message pops up.

Hunter:

I really wish that you stayed with me. I just received a phone call from my father. It's not good. Your father contacted mine to tell him that you are alive. Reconsider, please. Go to your grandmother's. She can keep you safe.

Reading those words, your father , causes my chest to tighten with fear. It weaves its way under my skin, wraps around my insides, and twists with each word I read.

Me:

No. I'm sure I'm safer going where I plan to. No one will know me there.

My head comes up, and I scan the street, looking for anyone who might seem off or watching me. Thankfully, it's midday. Surely, it would be reckless of someone to try to take me in the daylight.

I stand and head to the bathroom before the long journey, but when I go to push the bathroom door open, something doesn't feel right, as though I'm being watched. I turn around, looking for something—I don't know what.

A sharp pain, like a wasp sting on my neck, startles me, and I attempt to whip around, my hands flailing to the spot. I have no strength to scream as I collapse into a

stranger's arms. I can only make out a dark, fuzzy figure standing over me.

My body feels as though pins and needles are stabbing me through every inch of my skin. Then darkness starts to settle over me, the weight of it terrifying me.

Am I going to wake up?

* * *

"You shouldn't have done that, Landon." Hunter's angry voice growls in my ears, making me groan. "She's awake! You're okay, Aelina. Rest." A large hand presses on my forehead.

"I did what was needed. They would have snatched her up, and she already fights you at every damn turn. Relax, Hunter."

I hear a low grunt, and I can only assume it's Hunter.

"Hunter, settle down. She'll be fine." An elderly woman's voice piques my interest, but my heavy eyelids won't open. "Relax, dear. You're safe now. Rest," she whispers into my ear, and the hand remains on my head.

"You didn't have to drug her," he snaps.

"Like I said, I did what needed to be done."

No remorse there.

He's probably right. I wouldn't have come quietly or even at all. I don't want to be involved in any of this.

“Shut up, both of you. You’re hurting my head more,” I manage to say, my voice barely a whisper.

Someone chuckles, and if it didn’t hurt my head to do so, I’d roll my eyes.

“Oh, she’s got some sass, this girl. She must get it from me,” the woman says, and the sound of light footsteps and the click of a door follow.

Did she leave?

Was that who I think it was?

My grandmother?

She’s here! I so desperately want my eyes to open to see what she looks like. Even though coming here wasn’t my first choice, I’m excited to meet her.

“Why won’t my eyes open?” My voice strengthens as the drugs wear off.

“Sorry. Give it a moment, and they will.” I assume that’s Landon.

When the hand moves off my head, I want it back.

After what feels like a lifetime, my eyes finally open. I’m lying in a large, king-size, four-poster, solid wooden bed. The room is a fuzzy blur as my eyes adjust to the lighting. I take in the solid timber walls and the different natural tones bringing life to the room. The room smells like blossoming roses, providing a calming atmosphere. To the left, there’s a large window. The sky is a light pink color outside—sunset. And a familiar figure stands in front of it.

Hunter .

He moves toward the bed and sits, but I turn away to look at the other side of the room. I'm not ready to face him.

Another manly figure stands at the door.

Landon.

"How is the young lady?" The question comes from behind Landon.

I carefully move into a sitting position just in time to watch a lady walk in. She's elderly, her white hair tied in a neat ponytail, and she has a tiny frame. She walks in with such poise and shows such strength.

How old is she?

She walks over to the opposite side of the bed, joining Hunter. "Hello, love. My name is May. I'm not sure what this dashing young man has told you..." she gestures to Hunter, "... but I'm your grandmother, your father's mother. I'm sorry for what Hunter did to you, but it really is for your own good. I want you safe, and with him, you are."

My eyes widen.

"I know you probably have a million questions, but I think we should leave those for tomorrow. It's been a big day for you, thanks to Landon here." She looks pointedly at him, and he hangs his head, mumbling something I don't quite catch.

"Young man, I won't have that in my house," May snaps. Wow, she must have some wicked hearing, and I can't help but laugh. "You look so much like your mother, which I'm happy about."

She smiles, and it lights up the room. She has an aura surrounding her. I bet everybody who meets her falls in love with her.

“Nice to meet you, May. I’m—”

“I know who you are, Aelina. I’m the one who gave you that name. I needed to keep you safe. Unfortunately, I’ve failed.” Her hand takes mine, and I note how soft her skin is. She shakes her head, then says, “As I said, we won’t discuss that right now. Let’s get some grub in you and get all of you settled for the night.”

“Okay,” is all I manage to say. I can’t believe I’m here with someone who is my actual family.

My blood.

May stands and goes to the closet on the right side of the room. “My girl, all your clothes are in here.”

She opens the door, and I spot my suitcase on the floor. Above it, eight brightly colored dresses, three shirts, and four pairs of pants hang from the silver rail like clothes on a line—a small amount of belongings.

“Wow, thank you so much,” I gush.

She waves her hands, brushing me off. “It’s nothing for my granddaughter. There’s a shower through that door there.” She points to a door on the left side of the room.

“Thank you again.”

I push back the blankets and move to the side of the bed opposite where Hunter sits. As I process this whole ordeal, my head becomes less foggy. As things become

clearer, frustration bubbles toward Hunter, who doesn't seem to listen to anything I say. He brought me here even when I asked not to be included.

"I'll be out finishing dinner. Landon, you come help me, son," May says, and he nods, following her out the door.

I place my feet on the soft carpeted floor and stand to pull out some new leggings and a blue tank top. Clothes in hand, I walk slowly toward the bathroom, well aware of Hunter and his heated gaze.

"Let me help you." He rushes to my side, taking my arm.

I snatch it away from him, and he holds his hands up in defense. Stopping, I turn toward him, my face deadpan. "I told you I didn't want to be a part of any of this. Yet here I am, and I feel like death because of your stupid bodyguard out there. Did you have him follow me?"

Hunter's stare drops to the floor. He doesn't say anything but simply nods.

I narrow my eyes. "Thanks to you, I'm now in danger. Our fathers want me, not you. If you were the smart man you think you are, you would have helped hide me. Instead, you want to bring me into a world I know nothing about and want nothing to do with."

I drop my clothes, my hands coming up and shoving hard against his chest. My body temperature rises with the anger rippling through my veins.

Hunter moves back when I push him. His face is unreadable. The tension in the room is so thick a knife could cut through it. My breath is ragged as the hammering in my heart increases. My head can't figure out what to do. I've become a bird locked in a cage. Hunter has inserted himself into my life and now wants to own me. I won't

have it. I'm not some exotic bird who will remain a pet.

Bending over, I collect my clothes from the floor. As I come upright, my head spins slightly, and I press my finger and thumb to the bridge of my nose, hoping to settle it. Hunter takes my arm again, but I pull away, losing my balance. My hands fly up in the air, and I stumble backward. Then I'm falling. In seconds, I've got a throbbing pain in my ass.

"Oh my hell," I cry out and release a hiss between my teeth. Breathing through the pain, I struggle to hold back tears because of the pain shooting up my back.

Hunter rushes to my side. This time, he doesn't touch me or even make a move to assist me. "Let me help you." That soft, smooth-like-honey voice tickles certain parts of me and makes me want to fall at his feet, letting him do whatever he wants.

"You've done enough. I've survived perfectly fine on my own without you before..." I pause and gingerly pull myself off the cream-colored carpet. Straightening up, I say, "Just leave."

"Please forgive me, Aelina." The hurt is apparent in his voice, and he doesn't come across as the sort of man who would wear his emotions on his sleeve.

A battle wages within me. To let him in or pull away, but in the end, this is all too much, and the risk of letting him in isn't worth it. "Leave, Hunter. You've done enough for now."

I sigh and step around him, trying to conceal the pain with each movement, causing shooting stabbing pains up my back. I don't watch to see what Hunter does.

I can't believe the last twenty-four hours. That's how long it's taken for my world to fall on its axis once again, thanks to one man who decided I was better off knowing

the truth.

Well, they weren't wrong when they said the truth hurts, and the same goes for ignorance is bliss.

10

My mouth drops open at the size of the bathroom. It's triple the size of the one in my apartment, and I thought it was a good size, but this is something out of a designer magazine.

A spa bath is in the far corner of the room. On the other side is a shower with a large showerhead the size of a huge-ass dinner plate hanging from the ceiling. White tiles shine on every side. It's stunning, and I feel special having the privilege to use these amenities.

A dark cloud settles above me as I consider what this luxury could mean.

The underworld has sure been nice to my grandmother.

Was all this bought and built with blood money?

Giving my head a quick shake, I push that thought clear from my mind and debate between the shower and the spa bath. The shower wins this time.

I turn on the hot water and place my clothes on the basin countertop. Looking up, I stare at my reflection in the mirror—dark hair and dark rings under my dark eyes from lack of sleep last night. My grandmother's words, "You look like your mother," come to mind, and I wonder if that's true.

The girl before me is a broken piece of who she once was. Six months ago, I was sleeping under a bridge with nothing going for me. I couldn't seem to get a job to

support myself. In some way, I think I should be thanking Hunter. He gave me a second chance at life.

Only it's not the life I wanted.

"Who are you?" I ask the girl in the mirror.

I stand there for a moment, the steam fogging up the mirror. Slowly, my reflection fades away until I'm just a blurry figure. A nothing. No one. Yet, Hunter thinks I'm someone important.

I step away from the mirror, not wanting to face any more truths, tug my shirt over my head, and strip off my pants. I open the shower door and test the temperature—scalding and perfect.

As I move under the large showerhead, the droplets heat my skin. The clear water runs over the lines and curves of my body.

I glance around the stall until I spot a pink bottle. Picking it up, I see it's a cherry blossom body wash and get to work, lathering my body with it. The smell is divine and fresh. Never have I used anything so beautiful.

As soon as I finish scrubbing away all the dirtiness, I don't have the energy to wash my hair, so I sit on the tiled floor under the flowing water. It's refreshing and cleansing. I pull my legs up to my chest, wrap my arms around them, and place my head on my knees.

After what feels like a lifetime, the door flies open. My head flicks up, and Hunter stands there.

"What do you want? Can't you just leave me alone?" I mutter, my tone deadpan and

eerily calm.

Hunter quickly turns around to face the door. “Oh, sorry. I knocked, and you didn’t answer. I thought something had happened to you.”

My head swims a little when I stand, but not enough to make me off-balance. “I didn’t hear you. I’ll get out now.”

I watch him walk out, and as the door shuts, the moment it clicks, a familiar feeling weaves its way through my soul. An emptiness has settled into my mind, like a dark storm cloud has purposely taken away what light I had there. It reminds me of my childhood.

The homes I stayed in, the foster parents who had me, who never wanted me. I was just a money pit for them. I was nothing. My bed was a thin camping mattress while their own kids would reap the rewards of my care money with fancy new toys and gadgets they didn’t need, even though I suffered.

It wasn’t just me, though. There were more kids in those houses in the same position. I wish I could change that part of this country’s government. Not all are bad, but some don’t know any other way to make a difference so no more kids will suffer like I did. I wonder if my grandmother thought about the ramifications of her actions.

Did any of my sisters end up with a bad family?

I can’t help but wonder what their lives have been like.

When I shut off the shower, the cool air hits my skin, causing goose bumps. Stepping onto the mat, I grab the softest towel I have ever used from the rack. Mine are all scratchy, old, and worn. I’ve never had good things. I was always told I was dirty and would amount to nothing.

How different my life would have been if I'd grown up in this house, in this underworld, as they call it. Would it be as big of a mess as it is now, or would it be better? Would Hunter be a completely different person than who he is now?

There's no way to tell.

* * *

After I get dressed, I leave the bedroom and head down the hallway. Judging from the aroma, something delicious is cooking. It makes my mouth water.

I look up and down the wooden-walled hallway. There are three closed doors, which I assume are more bedrooms. Turning left, the hall opens up into an open-plan living area. The kitchen is to my right, and a dining table and chairs are to the left. It's like something out of a fairy tale.

The walls are the same wood as my bedroom, and cream tiles line the floor with large rugs in the living area in front of the couch.

Looking for Hunter, he and Landon are nowhere to be seen.

Good, maybe he finally listened and left.

May's head pops out from what must be the pantry. "Hello, dear. How are you feeling?" She smiles softly.

I fold my arms over my chest as a chill runs through me. "I'm okay."

May sets some spices she was holding on the kitchen counter and comes at me with open arms. It's like the dam wall has crumbled away, my bottom lip trembling, and tears sting my eyes. I can't hold back all the emotions wreaking havoc on me.

May's arms wrap securely around me. "It's okay, dear child. I've got you now," she repeatedly says, trying to soothe me.

The cries that tear from my throat are years of feeling unworthy of anything good. With each sob, May rubs my back and assures me it's okay.

When the sobs stop, it's as though I've cried away a lifetime of troubles, as if I've released all the demons I had been holding on to. May's hold on me loosens, and she moves back, but her hands rest on my shoulders. Facing her, tears also stream down her pink-colored cheeks.

"I'm sorry." I sob as I wipe away the wetness on my face.

"Oh, my dear, you have nothing to be sorry about. It is me who should be sorry. I should never have left you at the hospital. I thought you would have gone to a good home." Her voice shakes as she speaks, and more tears silently roll down her cheeks.

I'm not sure what to say, so I keep quiet. Things have happened so fast that I haven't been able to process it all yet.

"I know this must be hard for you. We have plenty of time to talk about things. If you want to take a seat, I'm just finishing up dinner." She glances over her shoulder, and I follow her gaze. "Oh no, please don't let the bottom of the pot be burned." She lets go of me and rushes to the pot bubbling on the cooktop. Then she quickly, yet gently, pulls it from the burner.

"That smells really nice," I say.

"Thank you. It's an old family recipe. I call it Nanna Red's beef hot pot." I smile at the name. "It's good to see you smile." She grins back. "I'll go get the boys, and we can eat." She sets off through what could be a back door. As she opens it, I catch a

glimpse of a large barn and some garden beds.

My gaze moves over the area again. Pictures on the fireplace catch my eye, so I make my way over for a closer look. There are old photos, photos of couples, and baby photos—five tiny faces in separate frames. I can pick out the boys as they have blue blankets on them, and the girls have pink ones.

“Those are your siblings, my grandchildren.” May’s gentle voice comes up behind me, and she places a hand on my shoulder. Leaning past me, she picks up one of the girl’s images. “This is you.”

11

With shaky hands, I take the frame she holds out. I've never seen a photo of myself at this age.

I have short, thick, dark hair and a yellowish complexion.

"You had a little jaundice when you were born. You were such a quiet little thing. I hardly heard you make a peep." She stands beside me, gushing over my photo and recalling memories I've only ever dreamed about hearing.

"How old was I when you took me away?" I glance up at her.

Her hand comes to her mouth, and tears fill her eyes. Moving her hand away, she opens her mouth to speak but seems to stop herself. I don't push, giving her a moment.

That moment feels like forever.

"You were about six months ol —" She chokes on her last word as tears take over.

Hunter steps up beside her and wraps his arm around May's shoulders. "I think we should eat and maybe talk about these things later."

I pinch my lips together, forming a thin line. "Later?" I huff, placing the frame back on the shelf, then turn to face them. May's tears have settled, and Hunter still stands beside her. It appears Landon is still missing. "How much later do you expect me to

wait? Your family got to stay together while mine was torn away from each other. Who knows what kind of upbringing the rest of my sisters had.” I take a breath in an attempt to calm myself down.

May steps forward. “I am sorry. I’m sorry you missed out on growing up with family. You have no idea how much it has eaten me up for the last twenty-six years.”

I want to be angry.

I want to cry.

I want to lash out and throw all my anger at her.

My head drops. I can’t, though. “Do you mind if I take some food to my room? I think I’d like to be alone right now.”

May nods. “I’ll bring you something shortly, dear.”

I walk around them, heading straight for the bedroom.

I stand in front of a large sliding door leading onto a deck. Darkness has coated the world, and the moonlight shines through the trees surrounding the property. The blackness is slowly seeping into my soul. I have so many unanswered questions and so much pain from being left behind.

For all they knew, I could have been good in the underworld. I could have been an asset. But now, I’ll never know. I’ve been left with years of abandonment issues and a grandmother who now wants to be a part of my life.

“This entire situation is messed up,” I whisper to myself.

There's a light knock on the door.

"Come in," I call out over my shoulder.

The door opens, but I don't turn around. In the reflection on the glass, I watch Hunter enter and place a tray with a plate of food, some bread, and a glass of water on a large trunk at the end of the bed. Then he stands, staring at me.

"What do you want?" I snap, turning to face him.

He pushes his hands into his pockets. I notice he has taken off the suit and is now wearing beige dress pants, which fit nicely in all the right places, and a white fitted T-shirt, accentuating firm biceps and a body that looks to be chiseled to perfection.

My body temperature rises as I drink in his appearance.

"You were rude before."

I jerk my head back in shock, and my eyes narrow. "I was rude?" I point my finger into my chest. "Okay, says you who had me kidnapped and brought here. Now that's rude and illegal."

He doesn't move, only stares at me before saying, "I did what I thought was right. Do you want to die?"

His question is like a punch to the stomach. Of course, I don't want to die. Does anyone? "It's none of your concern what happens to me. It's taken twenty-six years for any of you people to come after me, and the night you show up, my world tipped on its axis, and I blame you," I yell and stab a finger in his direction.

"Well, I'm sorry for considering your life." His voice is so calm, and I find it irritates

me more.

“My life?” I yell. “From what you’ve told me, it’s not my life . You apparently have some claim over me. Isn’t that right? You’re only here for me.” Anger sears through me with each word I say.

Hunter steps closer, but I stay by the door and raise my hand. “Stop. Don’t come near me. I might gouge your eyes out. That’s how you’re making me feel right now.”

He pauses his advance, his eyes narrowing as though he’s contemplating if I’d actually do it.

A tense silence fills the space between us, and I glance around the room, not wanting to look Hunter in the eyes. When I do, it’s like they swallow my frustration, and all I want is for him to kiss me. It’s as though he’s fire and I’m ice. We don’t match. He melts away the hardness that coats my stale heart, warming it in every way possible.

A kiss.

A touch.

A smile.

Those are the things he knows have control over me.

Hunter stands in front of me, but I keep my eyes averted and step back against the cold glass. His near presence has my heart rate spiking and my breath quickening. His hand comes up to my chin, and he tries to tilt my head toward him. “Look at me, Little Red.”

He’s so close that his breath tickles my exposed neck. My stomach swims with

excitement and nervousness.

Damn you, Hunter.

“No,” I say breathlessly, my chest rising with each inhale.

Hunter bends his head and plants a featherlight kiss on the nape of my neck, and I release a heavy breath. My body comes to attention, aware of every move Hunter makes. I keep my hands planted on my thighs, even though the desire to reach out and rake my fingers through his hair is intense.

I must resist.

He’s learning my weakness— him .

His warm lips move slowly up my neck. “You can’t resist me. I know you want me, Little Red.”

My head drops back, allowing him access to my flesh. He’s right. I want his lips all over me. My body aches for his touch.

Hunter’s hands take my face, his hold firm yet gentle. He sweeps his thumb next to my mouth, and reluctantly, my eyes find his.

Desire and want echo in them.

“Hunter, I can’t keep playing this game.”

He leans over and crushes his warm lips to mine, swallowing everything I want to say. Hunter presses his body against me, and I have to push down the groan threatening to break free.

I want him so badly. Every part of me calls for his touch.

“Hunter...” I whisper between kisses.

“Don’t,” he warns breathlessly.

As much as I want to stay angry at him, I can’t. He plays me like a fiddle, and in a single moment, he can take all the frustration surging through my veins and turn it into desire and craving—a need for me to have him.

His hands leave my face, trailing down my body to the hem of my shirt. In one swift move, he lifts it over my head. Then he quickly wraps his arms around my tiny frame, pulling me tightly against him, his mouth devouring mine.

“The bed, Hunter,” I say against his lips, and he pauses, then releases me.

He wipes a hand over his face, breathing out a sigh.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

His head comes up, and in a split second, I know he’s pushing me away.

His brows furrow as though something is causing him great pain. “I’m sorry, Aelina. I shouldn’t push myself on you. As much as I want you, it’s clear you may not want me in the same way. The feelings you think you feel for me aren’t real.”

Anger warms my face. “How do you know what I’m feeling isn’t the real thing? You don’t know me,” I accuse, my voice trembling.

Tears threaten to fall.

How can he do this to me?

“Exactly. I don’t know you, and you don’t know me...” He pauses. I watch his face, the muscles in his jaw tensing and releasing. “I’m the son of someone who wants to cause you and your family harm. I’m a killer. I’m only here because you were promised to me.”

Each word slices right through my heart, leaving it split into pieces.

Without another word or so much as a glance back, he turns and walks toward the door, only briefly stopping with his hand on the handle.

“Fine! Walk away,” I scream.

12

My heavy eyelids finally open.

The moment they do, I have a moment of panic. Where am I?

Then everything comes flooding back in short bursts, switching from one to the next in rapid fire.

Hunter.

My father.

Being kidnapped.

My grandmother.

My pending death.

It's all too much.

My chest aches from the turmoil. I'm not sure I'll survive this world—a world I know nothing about. A small part of me wants to give up and run away. I'm not strong enough for this life—for Hunter's life.

A new pain settles in my stomach. Hunter's words from last night replay in my mind. "I'm the son of someone who wants to cause you and your family harm. I'm a killer.

I'm only here because you were promised to me."

I thought I could have actually meant something to him. Who am I kidding? I hardly know the man. How foolish was I to expect someone like him to have any kind of honest feelings for me?

Rolling onto my side, I face the glass door Hunter pushed me against last night. I bring my hand up, wiping my face and clearing that thought from my mind. Hunter is nothing to me, and I am nothing to him.

The sunlight shines into my room, and the clear blue sky and the tops of green trees are visible in the distance.

Where exactly am I?

Picking up my phone, I see six missed calls from the diner. I groan. This can't be happening. For someone who seems to be so on top of everything, I wonder why Hunter didn't call and tell them I've quit.

I slide from between my blankets and settle the cover over my legs. After a deep breath, I dial the diner's number and wait. Jenny, the diner manager and chef, answers.

"Hey, Jenny, it's Aelina."

I hear a sigh. "Are you okay?"

"I'm sorry, I should have called."

"It's okay. I understand you had an emergency."

“I’m sorry, what?” I question hesitantly as I climb out of bed.

“Aelina, we received a phone call before closing last night saying that you weren’t coming back, that you’d quit.”

“What? And you believed them?”

“What am I supposed to think? He said he was a family member and that you had an emergency you had to leave for.”

Hunter.

“Sorry, Jenny.”

Jenny sighs, then says, “There was also a guy who came in here last night looking for you, and I told him you’d quit.”

I shift my attention out the glass door and slide out of bed. I’m too distracted to reply to Gary as I walk to the door, unlock it, and step out onto the patio.

It’s a fresh morning. Goose bumps rise as the cool breeze brushes over my skin.

“Wait, Jenny...” I hold my breath, hoping she’s still there.

“Yeah?” she grumbles.

“Uh...who was it that was looking for me? Did he give you a name?”

Jenny releases a huff. “I don’t know. Some guy. Said he was family like I said.”

“Thanks, Jenny. I’m sorry about that. I really am.” I grimace and end the call before

she can say anything as I wrap my arms around myself.

Who would be looking for me there?

Could it be my father or possibly someone from Hunter's family who was at the diner?

"Why is this happening to me?" I ask the forest that stands proud and tall in front of me.

"Because you're someone important."

I spin around at the sound of May's voice. Her slim body leans against the doorway leading from my room to the patio with her arms folded. She's wearing a fitted dark pair of jeans with a light pink and white floral button-up shirt. Very country-like.

Rolling my eyes, I say, "What? Do you and Hunter practice those lines together?" My lips purse.

May simply laughs. "You have your father's smartass attitude." She shakes her head.

"I think he went to my old place of work last night."

May's brow furrows. "Last night, you say?"

I nod, not taking my eyes off her.

She shakes her head, then unfolds her arms and rubs her hands on her dark jeans.

"Well, get dressed, and come have some breakfast."

I open my mouth to respond, but she's turned her back and is now rushing out my

bedroom door. “Was it something I said?” I mumble.

Stepping back inside, I catch a faint smell. It causes my heart rate to spike. It’s Hunter’s woodsy scent. My eyes trail around my room, but he’s not there.

Picking up the top of my shirt, I smell it. His scent is all over my clothes. I grab a new shirt from the closet, slip off my old Hunter-scented one, and toss it to the floor. My door flies open, and my hands instantly react. I cover my chest, even though I have a sports bra on, but it probably shouldn’t worry me, given he pretty much saw everything in the shower last night.

“What the hell?”

Hunter stops, assesses my attire, and promptly turns around, shutting the door. I pull the fresh shirt over my head while Hunter stands there. “Sorry for barging in.”

“Ya think so?” I snap.

All the bitterness he left with me last night returns the moment he speaks.

He doesn’t want you, Aelina. He probably wants you dead.

He sighs, his shoulders sagging. “Can I talk to you, please? ”

“I guess I don’t have a choice, do I? You’re in here, so speak.” I fold my arms across my chest and put on my best not-interested-in-you face—pursed lips, angry eyes, and a furrowed brow all make the list.

Hunter turns, his stare causing my breath to hitch. Right away, I hate myself for my reaction. He is dressed as though he’s about to go strutting down the catwalk—black suit pants and a light blue button-up shirt. My thoughts reflect on last night and how

my fingers traced over the perfection of his body.

My body heats on its own accord.

Hunter clears his throat, pulling me back to the now. Angry Aelina. “May told me about what happened at the diner last night.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, and?” I ask, unable to hide my sarcasm.

“And... you should be more concerned, Aelina. This isn’t some game. If you were there last night, you most likely would have been taken by your father and delivered to mine. My father has been waiting for the last twenty-six years for revenge on your father because he thinks they took you and your sisters away from them, and the promises made between the families were broken. How much more do I need to spell this out for you? If your father gets a hold of you before I get to present you as my future wife, he’ll take you to my father, who will hold nothing back because of your family’s betrayal. He will kill your father and you,” he shouts, his face going red and the veins in his neck popping out.

I step back, but Hunter tracks my movement. He walks around the other side of the bed and stands at the patio’s glass door, blocking my escape. “I don’t understand, why now? And why haven’t they just killed my father? Surely, he isn’t that good at hiding. None of this makes sense. I have no knowledge and grew up thinking I had no family. How is my death a form of payment? And if my father is going to be killed, why would he risk that?” I’m exasperated with the circles we keep talking in.

“I know this is a lot, and I’m sorry. If I thought there was another way, I would have pursued that, but things have escalated with your father’s reappearance. I need you to understand the severity of it all. Death is all that awaits you unless you’re at my side. And yes, I’m being selfish in this. I want what is mine.” His eyes flare with the last word, a slight growl rumbling in his chest, making my breath catch. “My father is

unpredictable at best, but with you standing by my side, my family isn't allowed to touch you," he states, hanging his head low.

It's obvious this is weighing on him. I want to touch him, reassure him that I'm okay, but I don't move, even though a part of me is being pulled toward him. I have to fight the desire to go to him, to keep my feet planted on the spot. "I get it. But would this have happened if you hadn't shown up at my place of work?"

Hunter shrugs, and my eyes land on his large shoulders, moving up and down. "My father told me that he'd heard talk that you are alive. He didn't tell me how he knew." He turns his body and leans against the glass. "He told me that a year ago and set me the job of finding you. It took me months to locate you, and it was a good thing I did."

"So he sent you to find me. Why bring me here then?"

"Because I want things to be different, and so do our grandmothers. Those silly old bats concocted this whole thing. My granny made sure I was brought up right and not a stone-cold killer who followed every single one of my father's orders."

I move toward my bed and sit on the edge. "I get that you want things differently. I get that maybe us working together will do that. But I guess I'm not on the same page."

Hunter moves to the opposite side of my bed. "When couples from separate families come together, they're the most powerful. They have a hold over both parties. Your words could mean the difference between whether someone lives or dies. You get to decide what becomes of the underworld and the people who follow those families, who work with them, who run their business. Every aspect. Me and you together are something so powerful no one could stop us."

13

My mouth opens, then closes again. His words have left me speechless. Something so powerful no one could stop us.

Is that how it is in his world?

Hunter comes around to my side of the bed, and I quickly stand. “I know this is a lot to take in. You have plenty to think about, but remember that us, married, could change the game and the number of deaths that happen unnecessarily.”

I step back, feeling cornered. “I’m not going to marry you. I don’t know you, and you’ve made those feelings about where I stand with you pretty clear, especially last night when you told me you were only here because I was promised to you.”

He releases a frustrated breath, his hand coming up and sliding down his tired face. “Why are you being so difficult?”

“I’m being difficult?” I grit through my teeth. “How dare you?” I stomp up to him, my finger stabbing him in the chest. “You brought me here when I wanted nothing to do with you or your family or even to do with my own. They abandoned me. Do you know what it’s like growing up with nothing? Searching for your next meal in the trash? Having foster parents treat you like garbage? No, you wouldn’t because you had your family,” I scream, angry, frustrated, and exhausted as my throat clogs with emotion.

I move around Hunter and head straight for my bathroom. I don’t want him to see the

tears already falling down my cheeks.

“Aelina,” he calls after me.

I don’t stop. I can’t. My heart is racing at a crazy erratic speed. After opening the door, I quickly head inside, slamming and locking it. My sweaty palms grip at my tight chest. I attempt to inhale to calm myself, but my breath gets caught in my throat. My legs give way, and I slide down the door, collapsing in a heap on the floor. Silent sobs rip through my already tender body.

I’m worn down with all the new information given to me over the last couple of days. I’ve exposed more of myself than I wanted to with Hunter. I don’t want Hunter to see me emotional and weak. He could use that against me, which I don’t need.

The door handle wiggles. “Aelina, let me in,” Hunter demands, and hearing that tone only makes me more defiant.

“No. Go away. You don’t own me.”

Silence, then his words become more demanding and dominant. “Oh, believe me, Little Red. I own you. You belong to me, and one way or another, you will be mine, whether it is by choice or force.” His tone combined with the threat of his words, rattle me to the core.

My body trembles as rage ignites inside me like a wild inferno, and I break out in a sweat, sending a shudder through me. My hands ball into fists, and my nostrils flare in complete exasperation.

He’s infuriating, and I want to show him just how strong this tiny girl can be. Pulling myself off the floor, I unlock the door and yank it open.

Hunter stands there red-faced, his eyes hauntingly cold.

My hands come up and shove him hard in the chest. “I will never be yours. Get out!” I yell and continue to shove him in the chest.

He takes a step back each time. After three pushes, he snatches my wrists tight in his grip, and I wrestle against his hold.

“Stop.” His booming voice echoes against the walls.

My heart jumps into my throat. He’s furious, the vein in his neck popping out and throbbing in time with his heartbeat.

I stop struggling, and Hunter lets go of my wrists. My arms fall to my sides, my skin burning from his tight grip.

We both pant for breath, fiercely staring at each other. Then something within me clicks, and I turn my back to him. I release a heavy sigh. “Just get out, Hunter.”

I wring my hands together, my shoulders sagging, hoping he leaves. Instead of the door closing, there’s heat at my back. Hunter’s low growl against my ear causes me to stiffen. “You can deny me all you want, Little Red, but I don’t see any other option for you. Become mine and be safe, or leave and end up in a shallow grave dug by either my father or yours. Take your pick.”

Tingles run down my spine, and I can’t stop the shiver washing over me. The promise in his words pushes fear ahead of any other emotion trying to gain first place in my body.

What options do I really have?

Do I want Hunter? Possibly.

Do I want to marry him? Uh...no. I hardly know him.

Do I want to end up dead? Hell no.

Warm lips press against my neck, and I automatically tilt my head, allowing him.

Damn you, body.

“Stop denying what you really want...which is me,” he states with a hint of arrogance that has me snapping back to reality so fast I have whiplash.

I move away from Hunter and turn to face him. A cocky grin is plastered across his good-looking face.

“For all you know, I’m playing you .” My eyebrows raise, and his smile is gone as soon as the words leave my mouth. “You’re the one playing with fire. I may appear to be a broken little girl, but there’s so much about me you don’t know...” I pause, a smug look on my face, then continue, “Game. On.”

Hunter laughs a full-bellied kind of laugh. “Oh, Little Red, you have no idea who you’re dealing with. Let’s make a deal. Whoever succumbs first to the other gets what they want. For you, that means freedom. I can help you disappear. For me...” He shifts closer and leans over me, his dark eyes holding my gaze. My chest tightens, awaiting the rest of his response. “I get you. All of you.”

He thinks he’s so smart.

“Get out, Hunter. You’re not needed. Go deal with bad people.”

His eyes widen slightly, but he says nothing and nods.

I release the breath I was holding. How the hell am I going to resist Hunter? My body demands his touch—craves it. I have to control myself and not fall into his trap.

“What the hell have I gotten myself into?” I mutter to an empty room.

Moving to my suitcase, I get out my flip-flops to head out, needing something to eat. My stomach is ready to eat itself. It’s growling that much.

The house is silent as I walk down the hallway and approach the kitchen. No May or Hunter. I step out the back door. A lush green, freshly cut lawn glistens under the sun. The same barn I saw yesterday has a door wide open, and I catch a glimpse of a tractor. Beyond the barn are open fields. Part of it is full of tall trees and thick bushes surrounding half the property like a protective wall from the outside world. The scene takes my breath away.

A place like this never existed to me, but in my dreams, I’d always wished to walk around somewhere as amazing as this.

I head toward the large brown and white barn. My flip-flops crunch along the dirt path. When I get to the door, a horse whinnies inside, and curiosity gets the better of me. I pull the door open, and the scent of hay and animals hits my senses. It’s comforting, in a way. It feels homey and welcoming.

This is something I would have really enjoyed growing up. I would have liked to be a country bumpkin. I laugh to myself at the thought.

A loud snort and stomping of feet catch my attention as I walk past the stalls. Turning toward the sounds, I find a black horse. She’s beautiful with a silky, shiny coat and white spots on her hind.

I click my tongue. “Here, girl,” I whisper so as not to startle her.

Her head comes up at the sound of my voice. Then she turns and walks toward me. I hold out my hand, waiting for her to come close. She sniffs my outstretched hand, and I move my fingertips over her nose. Without further hesitation, she comes closer and allows me to rub the side of her face.

“Aren’t you a pretty girl?” I coo.

“Her name is Snowflake.”

My hand whips away from the horse so fast it startles her, and she rears up, stomping her hooves.

May steps up beside me. “Snowflake here is a toey girl. Real skittish. She doesn’t even let me pet her like you just did.” May gently shoves my shoulder.

“Then why do you keep her?” I question. I hold my hand out again, hoping Snowflake will come back to me.

“She’s special. Plus, she holds a place in my heart.” May pulls a carrot out of the bucket hooked on her arm, and Snowflake pauses, eyeing the carrot. Still, she doesn’t come for it. May holds the carrot out for me to take. “Here. She might take it from you.”

I take it nervously from her grip, glancing sideways at her, unsure of what to do. I’m worried Snowflake will nip me. “Won’t she bite my fingers off? I’ve never fed a horse before.”

May laughs at my moment of panic. “No. Just hold it out, and she’ll bite the top off, then lay it flat on your hand, and she’ll take it from there. Bend your fingers back so

there's no loose skin for her to chomp on."

I quickly hand the carrot back, earning me more laughter. "Will you stop laughing at me? You deprived me of this part of growing up," I snap, and instantly regret what I said. May's face drops, her radiant smile disappearing. I reach out and rest my hand on her shoulder. "May, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. You were doing what you thought was best. I'm sorry."

May brushes away a single tear, and I'm filled with remorse. "Don't worry about it, dear."

Before I can say anything, Snowflake nudges my cheek. I jump away, scared she's going to bite my face. When I settle my nerves, I catch May holding her chest in a fit of laughter. "Oh, come on. Cut me some slack."

"She's very drawn to you, which is no surprise." May holds the carrot back out to me. Hesitantly, I grab it and hold it like she instructed.

"Why is it no surprise that she's taken to me?" I can't help but ask as I lay the second part of the vegetable on my palm, and Snowflake takes it easily.

I give her a gentle rub down her neck as she sniffs around me for more food.

May hands me an apple and says, "Because she was meant to be yours."

14

“Mine?” My other hand comes to my chest, and I can’t hide the shock in my tone.

I look back to Snowflake to ensure I correctly give her the apple so she doesn’t bite me. May rests her hand on my shoulder as I do, putting my worries at ease. Once Snowflake takes the apple, I glance over at May.

“I bought her when you would have been sixteen. Yes, she’s getting on now, but I hoped you would get to meet her one day and bond.”

I turn my attention to the horse. She is mine. “I’ve never had anything this beautiful before. Heck, I’ve never even owned a car.”

“I’m sorry. Come with me to do the animals, and we can talk.”

I give Snowflake another pat with the promise of returning.

“Okay.” May’s gaze drops to my feet, and I follow her stare. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, you need some boots for a start. I might have some that fit you. Let’s go back to the house.”

I follow her out of the barn, processing the fact I have a horse. May must realize I need a moment because she doesn’t say anything on our walk back.

Standing in the living area, I wait as a picture on the mantle above the fireplace

catches my attention. A familiar face stares back at me. It's a man—a young man. He looks about my age or younger.

I walk over and pick up the wooden-framed picture. A familiarity hits me, and I swear I know this person. I spin around as Hunter comes down the hallway.

Holding up the picture, I say, "I know this guy. I've seen him before." Hunter's face scrunches as he approaches me, and I hand him the photo. "I've seen him before."

"You couldn't have. Where did you see him?"

Pressing my palm to my head, I wrack my brain, trying to remember exactly where. Then, a clear image pops up. "He came into a place I was working at about eighteen months ago. His face is so familiar. He would come in every night and stay until close, then walk me to my car at the end of the night." I shrug. "I thought he liked me, but he never made any kind of moves. We became friends."

May comes up beside me. "What's going on?"

I tell her what I just told Hunter, who says nothing. He has a look of pain in his dark eyes. Why?

May's head falls, and tears fill her eyes. She turns to Hunter, who opens his arms for her, and she sobs into his chest.

What did I say?

"What's going on? Who is he?" I take the photo from Hunter and study the face again. Those same kind eyes, that dark hair, and a grin any girl would fall for.

Hunter clears his throat. "His name is Nash..." He pauses. I register the name. Nash .

“He was your older brother.”

My eyes drop to the picture again. A lump forms in my throat. My brother . Then something else clicks as I remember everything Hunter has filled me in on since we met.

“He’s the one who died,” I state, my voice trembling.

Hunter nods, a glaze coming over his eyes. In seconds, it turns to anger. “I’m sorry, May,” he whispers, and she gently pushes away from him.

Her splotchy and red face tilts up to his. “You had no idea what was going on. It’s not your fault. I blame myself for sending him to her and putting them on your father’s radar.” Her voice shakes with each word.

Hunter gently wipes away fresh tears that keep falling.

A wetness hits my cheeks, and I quickly swipe my tears away. I have no right to be upset. I didn’t know Nash like they did. I knew him for a very short time, but I remember certain things about him—that cheesy smile, his booming laughter at his silly jokes, and his caring attitude toward not only me but others. He always made sure that all the ladies at the diner I was working at got to their cars or the bus safely. He was a pure gentleman.

“Do you know who killed him?” I blurt out, not really thinking of the consequences.

Both faces look my way. The way Hunter stares me down tells me I shouldn’t have asked.

May comes toward me, placing her arms around me. “My girl, I don’t know the details. All I know is that he’s gone. He had big plans to change things.” May steps

back and continues, “He sent me a letter telling me that he’d found you.”

“He what ?” Hunter interjects, his eyes wide as he looks at May.

She waves him off, and his mouth quickly shuts. “Yes, he sent me a letter. Come sit down, and I’ll tell you all I know.”

I follow her to the table, and then she disappears down the hallway.

“You know something, don’t you?” I hiss at Hunter.

His eyes narrow. “It’s not your concern.”

“It is my concern when it comes to my family and me.”

“I’ll fill you in later,” he grits out through clenched teeth while quickly glancing over his shoulder.

I glare at him, squeezing my hands into fists to refrain from slapping him clear across the face. Damn, he frustrates me with all his secrets. Secret this and secret that. I grind my teeth together.

May joins us at the dining table and places a small box in front of her. Hunter sits at the end of the table with May and me on either side. “I was hoping to wait until we got talking some more, but I guess now is as good a time as any.” She takes a deep breath, then looks at me. “You said you knew Nash’s face.”

I nod.

“It was about eighteen months to two years ago that I told him about you and your sisters. He deserved to know. I knew he was nothing like his father. Let’s just say he

wasn't very happy with me, knowing he had more family out there that he would never get to meet." Her hand comes up, wiping tears off her cheeks.

I reach across the table for her hand, and she takes it. Peace floods through me.

Hunter's hand rests on her shoulder. "You did what you had to, May," he says gently.

"I know I did. Still doesn't help the feelings I have of blame. I blame myself for Nash's death." I go to open my mouth, as does Hunter, but May holds up her free hand. "Nothing either of you say will change my mind, so don't, please."

She releases my hand and opens the box in front of her. It's an old white cardboard thing with different kinds of flowers painted on it. After removing the lid, she sets it aside, pulls out a picture, and hands it to me.

Shock rattles me as I stare down at myself. I'm laughing at something, dressed in my old diner uniform. Then, there's another photo of Nash and I smiling together. It's uncanny how much we look alike when I see us side by side. "This is me, obviously. How do you have these?"

Hunter leans over and focuses on the picture. His scent wraps around me, comforting me in a way I can't deny. How am I supposed to keep pushing him away when my body craves the solace only he can provide?

"Nash sent them to me. When he found out about you and your sisters, he made it his mission to find you all. I told him everything I knew, like where I dropped you off, and he must have followed the paperwork to where you ended up. I'm not sure." She shrugs, then pulls out another two pictures.

Two unfamiliar faces stare at me. In both pictures, Nash had taken selfies with both of them. Nash smiles with them in the photos. He must have done to them what he

did to me—befriend me.

“Are these...?” I leave the question hanging, my heart racing as I process what I’m being told. It’s an information overload.

“Your sisters,” May says gently.

I study the photos. Both have long dark hair like mine. One has brown eyes, the other blue, and I can clearly see we are related with the photos side by side.

We each have a dimple on one of our cheeks—the same side, actually, which is crazy. Both girls appear to be happy and healthy, but a photo can easily hide what goes on behind closed doors. I can only hope they have a better life than I do.

May pulls out an envelope that’s clearly been opened. “This letter holds all the information about each of your siblings.” I hold out my hand to take it, but May shakes her head. “I’m not giving you this until you’re ready.”

A flare of anger shoots through me, and I stand, the chair scraping along the floor. Hunter rises as well. “I deserve those names and addresses. That’s my family!” I point at the envelope.

“I understand you’re frustrated and upset, but I need to know they’re going to be safe before their lives are uprooted and they’re thrown into a world they’re not prepared for, and one you are not even ready for.”

I release a puff of air through my lips. “What? So it’s okay for you both to do it to me, but no one else. How’s that fair?” My face heats as I speak.

“Aelina, you’re a lot stronger than them. I know it. I’ve heard about your strength and endurance. I have something else for you right now.” She rummages through the box

again and pulls out another envelope, which hasn't been opened.

She hands it over to me, and my hands shake as I take it. "Who's it from?" I study the neat handwriting on the envelope addressed to me.

"Nash."

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“N ash?” I can’t hide my shock.

May nods. “He wrote one for you and one for each of your sisters.”

“How...how did he know he wouldn’t be around to give it to us?” I look to Hunter, hoping he will have an answer, but he doesn’t look at me. It’s as though this whole conversation makes him nervous.

May shrugs, tears in her eyes as she studies the box’s contents. “I don’t know. I have my suspicions, as I’m sure you probably do as well. I received the letters, then found out he had been killed a couple of days later.”

May wipes away the streaks on her red, blotchy face and places the lid back on the box, walking away and clutching the envelope containing my sisters’ information. She leaves me with pictures of my brother and sisters, a letter from my dead brother, and Hunter, the man who kidnapped and took me to her home.

So many questions burn within me. I want all the answers. I stare at the photos again with the envelope, my body turning numb and my mind unable to process all the information I’ve received.

My brother found me and kept me safe. He found my sisters, and I can only hope they’re safe as well. I want to find them. I steal a glance at Hunter, who is simply watching me. There is a softness in his eyes that I’ve never seen before. A part of me thinks he knows more than he’s letting on.

He has secrets, and I want to know them.

“Is there another photo somewhere of my other brother?” I direct the question at Hunter.

He seems to know quite a bit about my family, considering he’s from the family that wants to take mine out completely.

Hunter stands and walks to where I saw Nash’s photo, taking another frame from the wall. He comes back and hands it to me. The man looks very similar to Nash, except his hair is a touch longer, and he has more scruff on his face. His eyes scare me. Nash’s were friendly and warm. His? Not so much.

“What’s his name?” I swallow the fear that’s solidified in my throat.

Would my own brother kill me or his sisters? Did he kill Nash?

“Miles,” he states, lacking all emotion.

“Did he kill Nash?” I catch the angry vein that pulses when Hunter is mad. He turns away from me and starts walking out of the house. “That’s right, walk away again when it all gets too much.” He stops, turning his haunting look on me, yet says nothing. “I know you’re keeping something from me, and the longer you take to trust me, the longer it will be before I trust you.”

Not waiting for a response, I grab the letter and photos and take them to my room. Placing them on my bed, I take one more look at all of them. I have sisters. Then, my gaze falls to the envelope. A part of me wants to rip it open and find out what my brother had to say, but the other part doesn’t want to open the closet and discover skeletons hidden there.

What am I going to do?

I collapse onto the bed, staring at the wooden ceiling. My stomach rumbles, and I remember I haven't eaten anything this morning. Sitting up, I put the letter and photos on the bedside table and return to the now-empty living area.

I'm not sure where Hunter went. May needed a moment, and I don't blame her. This would be a lot for her as well.

It's as though my eyes are being opened for the very first time. Like a newborn must learn new things, now, so must I. I must decide if this is what I want. After seeing the pictures of my sisters, hearing about Nash, and spending time with May, I want to be a family again. Who wouldn't want their family together again?

But it comes at a cost.

Hunter.

Marrying him and dealing with his family. I'm not sure I'm strong enough.

Lost in thought about everything, my stomach growls, reminding me I need to eat. I head to the kitchen, open the refrigerator, grab some leftover stew from last night, and heat it up. When it's done, I take a bottle of water and head out to the back porch.

This place is stunning. The green lawn, the sun lighting it up and giving it a fresh look. The air here is fresh and clean. It's nothing like living in town. Birds are flying around, singing. Beautiful gardens with different flowers are spread around the back of the house.

A black SUV pulls out of one of the barns and drives past where I'm sitting. From what I can tell, Landon is driving with Hunter in the passenger seat. Hunter is

watching as they pass, and my stomach tightens. Where is he going?

When I finish my meal, I wash my bowl and rinse it, stacking it in the dishwasher. I spot the boots on the floor, which I'm guessing are the ones May brought to me this morning before everything happened.

After slipping off my flip-flops, I make my way back out to Snowflake. I pause when I see May standing there, watching her as well. She turns and greets me with one of the warmest smiles I've ever received.

"Sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to dredge up the past. I'm sure it's painful for you," I say.

She waves at me. "Don't be sorry. You have every right to know about your family."

"Can you tell me about my father? Why is he the man he is now?" I was going to say the evil man but thought better of it.

May picks up the bucket off the ground near her feet and hands it to me. "We can talk as I show you the ropes around here."

I take it willingly. "Okay."

I glance at what is in the bucket. It honestly looks like something I'd throw up. May chuckles, and I'm sure my face is contorted in a grimace.

Following her out the back of the barn where the stalls are, there are two large mud-covered pigs. She points to the trough. "Tip that bucket of food in there."

"You call this food?" I remark, unable to hide my disgust.

“Hamlet and Ham love it.”

I do a double-take. “That’s their names?”

She laughs. “Yes. They will eventually be killed for food. I’m all about growing my own here. Out in the fields, you’ll find some good cows as well.”

I balk at her words. “I think I may never eat meat again.” I gag. “Remind me to hide when they get slaughtered.”

“Don’t worry. All the stuff happens away from the farm. I probably wouldn’t eat meat again if I saw it get done. But I try not to get attached to the animals that will go to slaughter.”

“Um...where did Hunter go?” I ask, tipping the sludge into the trough, and the pigs come running over, squealing and bumping into each other, causing a ruckus as they dig into their food.

May clears her throat. “He has to make an appearance back with his family, or they’ll get suspicious.”

My head flies up. “So he’s working both sides?”

She nods.

“How do you know we can trust him?”

A smile tugs on her lips. “Hunter is nothing like his father. If he were, I would have turned him away when he came to me eighteen months ago and told me about Nash. He and Nash were working together to find you all. They found the other girls first because I gave them to families who couldn’t have babies.”

“Why didn’t you give me to someone like that?” I ask, rubbing my hand on my aching chest.

“We made a mistake. We thought you would be safe, but we were wrong. Come on. Let’s go feed the horses.”

I follow her back into the barn with still so many questions burning on the tip of my tongue. Instead of asking them, we scoop oats and some new hay into the stalls of five horses, including Snowflake’s. May watches me as I work and guides me in what I should be doing.

“So you want to know about your father?” she asks, and I pause mid-shovel as I muck out the stall. I glance up at her and nod. “Your father, Arthur Redmont. He wasn’t always the evil man he is today. Each time one of his kids went missing, he lost trust with the families of the underworld. They all thought he had hidden his family so that his daughters wouldn’t be brought up in this world. Little did they know that two grannies were the ones saving those girls. If Hunter’s parents had girls, we would have done the same thing. I never wanted any of my grandchildren living through the dangers I did as a girl in this type of business.”

This causes me to pause. “Did you have an arranged marriage?”

Her features turn soft. “I did, but thankfully, my husband was a good man, and I knew that for a long time. Sadly, he passed away five years ago from a heart attack.” She clears the emotion out of her throat before continuing. “I’m not telling you to marry Hunter, but he’s a good man too.”

“Good man, my ass,” I mutter under my breath. “So my father went into hiding after people began not to trust him?”

“Yes. When Nash was old enough, he stepped in and started to make your family

name trustworthy again with the families of the underworld.”

A heaviness sits in the pit of my stomach. “And that still got him killed,” I whisper.

“Yes.”

Silence falls between us as I return to my work and finish Snowflake’s stall. I’m sure May was wrong when she said Snowflake is skittish because she seems calm to me. She comes up behind me, nudging me with her nose. I laugh and turn to face her, running my hand along her smooth coat. They say if you’re calm, the animal will sense it, and as nervous as I am being around a large animal, I feel safe.

“Here.” May hands me a carrot and an apple, and I feed them both to Snowflake, giving her a good brush down before leaving.

I’m enjoying this farm-life type of work. Perhaps it’s something I was supposed to do in my life.

“Thanks for your help today,” May says as she packs away the last of the tools. “I have to go to town later. Will you be all right on your own for a few hours?”

A prickling sensation crawls up my neck. My father could know where I am.

“May, do you know where my father is? Does he come here at all?”

May comes up to me and takes my hand. “No, dear, I don’t know, and he hasn’t come in a while. Don’t worry, Hunter will be back just after I leave, so you won’t be alone for long. I just have to get some things from the grocer.”

“Okay.”

* * *

The day drifts by, and the letter from Nash plays on my mind. I can't bring myself to read it yet. So many emotions surge within me.

Confusion.

Hurt.

Hate.

How do I move past this? My life has been and always will be one of survival. Only now, it's a different kind of survival.

I need to outlive my father, for one.

Then find my siblings.

And possibly trust Hunter.

"I'll be back in about two hours. Hunter should be home within the hour."

I take a deep breath, hoping to steady the unease dancing in my stomach. The sun has started to dip behind the mountains outside, meaning it will be dark soon, which frightens me.

"Okay." My voice is barely a whisper.

May exits through the back door, and I stay settled on the couch. I catch a red truck leaving and driving up the long driveway. Now alone, I'm left with my unsettled thoughts.

Deciding a bath might calm my rattled nerves, I lock all the doors to the house and go to my bedroom, checking that my sliding door is locked as well. The unease starts to calm now that I am locked inside, making me feel safe.

After stripping off my clothes while the bath fills up, I add some scented salts from the neatly set display on the counter. The lavender scent fills the room, the aroma instantly calming.

Glancing through the doorway, I notice that blackness has coated the patio and the view of that dark forest beyond.

Don't worry. Hunter will be home soon.

I step one foot into the shin-deep water, and everything goes black.

What happened to the lights?

My heart rate accelerates, and I instantly pull my foot from the tub. In the movies, if people go looking for the source of the power outage, they end up dead, but I've barricaded myself in with no way out. Which means no one should be able to get in.

I grab my towel and wrap it tightly around my trembling body. The tightness in my chest continues to make my breaths shorter and quicker. I know if I keep this up, I'm going to hyperventilate, but being submerged in darkness is only making it worse.

"Come out, come out wherever you are, dear sister. "

16

The hand of dread reaches into my chest and squeezes my heart, turning my blood cold. The hairs on my arms rise, and my fingers clench tighter around the towel.

What am I going to do?

I race over and steal a peek into my room. A silhouette strolls past the doorway, making me duck back into the bathroom.

“Hiding will do you no good. I’ll find you, then I’ll kill you.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping this is all a dream. When a door slams, I jump out of my skin. Then I hear the click of another door. I take that as an opportunity to run. Peering out of the bathroom into my bedroom, the moonlight shines through my open curtains.

“Well, well, well.”

I freeze at the sound of the menacing voice in my doorway. Flicking my head toward it, I back away, my back hitting the cold glass, sending a bitter chill down my spine. I swallow the concrete which has formed in my throat. “What...what do you want?” My voice is so high-pitched I sound like a frightened mouse.

I try looking around the room for something to use as a weapon.

“What do I want?” he shouts, followed by maniacal laughter, sending shivers down

my spine. “I’m your little brother, and I’ve come to kill you so I can run our family business.” He takes a step closer, and my reaction is to try to move back, but I can’t.

Panic seizes my fight-or-flight reaction, and I do neither.

There is no way out for me. Is this how my life is going to end? By the hands of my own brother?

“You’re M-Miles?” I tumble over my words.

I can’t see him clearly enough to make out his features. The moonlight hits his face lightly, and it’s as though his eyes are as dark as onyx.

The eyes of death.

“Ding, ding, ding.” He holds up his hand like he’s ringing a bell. “Wow, you’re a smart one. They kept you hidden well. Dear old Granny, keeping her girls safe.” He cackles.

Clearing my dry throat, I say, “How did you know I was here?”

His finger comes up to his chin. “Well, now, let me see. I’ve been watching Hunter and his minion for some time now. I can’t say it was my most favorite job, but it paid well. His father will be disappointed to know that Hunter has betrayed his own flesh and blood.” He tsks, waving his finger in a disapproving manner.

“I’m no one. I have no idea who anyone is.”

“I don’t believe you,” he roars. “I’m going to be in charge, and all my siblings will be put to death. But first, I need to remove you from the equation. You’re the next in line, and if you should marry the traitor, then his family won’t be able to stop you

both.”

Hunter’s words come to the front of my mind. The whole time, he has been trying to protect me from the evil trying to hurt me, and I’ve been stopping him.

I feel useless. I don’t have the strength to survive the man standing before me. His threatening words and the vile he spews at me are things I should be used to, considering some of the families I grew up with, but the chill down my spine says otherwise.

“Are you ready to die?” He sneers, taking another step closer.

He’s so close to my trembling, towel-covered body. I watch his arm slip around behind him, then come back into view with what looks to be a gun.

“You don’t have to do this. I don’t want anything to do with your family or Hunter’s. Please, just let me be.” I hold my arm out in front of me.

“You really think I believe you? Just like Nash said he didn’t know anything about you.”

My eyes dart to the dark figure at the mention of Nash. “Did you kill him?”

Miles holds the gun out in front of him, the end pointing in my direction. This is it. No more narrow escapes. There’s no one here to help me.

His smile is menacing. “Yes. Don’t worry. You’ll be seeing him very soon. It was a pleasure meeting you, big sister.”

I freeze with fear.

Then the lights flick on. I duck and press my body hard against the glass door. The gunshot echoes around my room, and a searing slice of pain stabs me in the shoulder. I don't have time to register it as my heart slams into my chest like it's trying to escape. The next thing I know, I'm falling through a shower of glass.

The door I was pressed up against shatters over my body. Sharp pricks of pain shoot up the entire right side of my body, and a burning sensation in my left shoulder has my fingertips reaching for it. They come away blood-stained, and a sob rips out of my chest.

"Dammit," Miles curses, forcing my head up to watch him.

He steps my way. A surge of adrenaline pumps into my veins, and I lift my body from the glass, trying my hardest to keep the towel on me. I wince at the pain that sears from my feet right up my legs.

I need to move.

Thankfully, the house isn't high off the ground. I lean on my left arm on the rail to climb over, but it gives out from under me. I cry out, as sharp rocks dig into the side of my face, the skin tearing open, tears fill my eyes.

What's happened?

"You're not going to make it very far." Miles' voice is closer than I expected, and my breath catches.

I ignore all the agony my body is experiencing. My fight-or-flight mode kicks into high gear. I lift myself off the grass and run onto the road, taking off to the nearest tree. The gravel stones dig their way into the flesh of my bare feet. The pain is unbearable, but I need to keep going. I can't stop.

Another shot booms out into the night.

I heave in a large breath. My lungs feel as though they're unable to function properly. Miles curses again. I peek around the side of the tree and see him jumping over the patio.

This is it. My moment of survival.

I have to run.

I push myself off the tree, ignore all the torment I'm experiencing, and run straight for the barn. Not stopping, I head straight out the back. Another gunshot echoes, but it isn't near me this time.

I pause and turn to glance behind me, just in time to catch a dark figure running my way.

A new level of panic takes over.

I must keep going.

My head is dizzy, and every bit of energy I have seems to be dwindling fast. Inhaling the night air, I push forward once again.

I finally stumble into the tree line I'd been admiring this morning and find a thick bush, burrowing my way into its center. Collapsing into the ground, I suck in gasps of air. I can't keep my eyes open anymore.

"Aelina?" a familiar voice calls.

"Hunter?" I ask breathlessly, choking on his name as a ball of emotion clogs my

throat.

I need to keep my eyes open. Is it Hunter, or am I dreaming?

“Where are you?” It’s the same voice, and I pray my mind isn’t playing tricks on me.

“Here,” I croak out.

I push and kick my tender body along the ground through the thicket of bushes. A rush of footsteps crunches on the surrounding debris and stops at my head. A deep voice curses, and then I’m being lifted against a familiar body.

“I’m sorry, Little Red.” Warmth is pressed to my forehead before white bubbles dance in my vision, and darkness swallows me up.

* * *

“Will she be okay?” Hunter’s concerned words break the blanket of silence.

My eyelids are too heavy, and I can’t force them open. Who is he talking to?

“She will be. Just a few stitches on her side, a couple of cuts that aren’t too deep. The bullet wound is a through and through, so it will heal nicely. I would recommend rest.”

I’ve been shot? What happened last night?

“Yeah, okay,” Hunter says, and a hand gently presses onto my forehead.

“I mean it, Hunter. She needs rest. After everything you’ve told me that’s happened these last few days, I’m concerned she’s going to burn out and harm herself

somehow.”

How much more could happen?

It’s been three damn days since Hunter wormed his way into my life, actually, more like inserted. I’d hate to see what years or even another week together would entail. I’m positive I’ll die.

“Yes, I will make sure she rests. May will make sure as well.” Hunter sounds irritated at being told what to do, and it kind of makes me want to laugh.

Instead, a sudden bout of drowsiness clouds my mind, and my body becomes weighted to the bed.

Darkness envelops me once more.

17

Finally, my body feels as though a weight has been lifted from it, and my eyes slowly open. I don't move too fast as I'm unsure how I feel.

So far, if I'm not moving, I seem to be okay.

My eyes dance around the area in front of me. I'm not in the original room where I was staying. This one has the same features as my own, though.

Someone groans beside me, and my head flicks toward the sound. My eyes bulge at the sight of Hunter lying there shirtless with his eyes shut. I can't help but admire him. There's a peacefulness to his features that I haven't had a chance to witness.

He always seems so serious, like something is haunting him. His expression is always that of concern.

My eyes are drawn to the defined six-pack he has. I chew my bottom lip, my hand becoming twitchy, wanting to reach out and run my fingers over those smooth bumps. But I have an urgency that needs to be met—the bathroom is calling me.

I shift slightly, and pain radiates through my body, causing me to wince. Glancing down, I groan. A light sheet sits over my tender limbs.

Hunter springs up like a jack-in-the-box. "What's wrong? Are you okay?" His hands hover over my body, and his wild eyes inspect every part of me to check that I'm intact.

I'm wearing a black tank and boy shorts underwear. There are white patches scattered up the left side of my body, and I'm too afraid to move again for fear of the agony that will go shooting through every part of me.

"I'm fine," I grumble. Heat climbs up my throat toward my face, and I know I'm turning a bright shade of red.

Hunter slides out of the bed, pulling on a white shirt. My eyes are drawn to the way his muscles shift and flex with his movements as he comes to my side.

"What do you need?" His hands rub down his black jeans. There's worry etched on his face as his eyes move along my half-covered body.

I raise my left arm, not thinking, and a stabbing pain shoots up my arm. I can't help but cry out, bringing it up to rest it across my chest.

"Maybe avoid lifting that arm. You were shot in the shoulder."

I frown. Shot?

"What happened to me?" I close my eyes, trying to remember exactly what happened.

"Now's not the time to talk about it. You need to rest and heal before we discuss anything. What do you need?" Frustration slides off his tongue with each word spoken.

I stare at him. If I could shoot daggers with my eyes, he'd be dead. "The bathroom."

Without another word, he pulls the sheet off me, and I catch his twitching jaw muscle again. Gently, he slides his hands underneath me, and my good arm wraps around his shoulders. Hunter pulls me against his body, and I revel in his calmness.

We get to the toilet, and he places me on my feet. I wobble slightly, but his arms quickly wrap around me to steady me. “Will you be all right?” He glances down at me with a hunger in his eyes, our bodies pressing firmly against each other.

I swallow and nod, keeping my left arm to my chest, the throbbing continuing. “Do you have a sling or something for my arm? It’s hurting like crazy.” The pain is unbearable, but I don’t want to let Hunter know.

“May has one. I’ll go grab it.” Slowly, he loosens the pressure of his hold. The warmth from his arms disappears, and I’m left standing on my own. A biting chill fills my body from my toes to the top of my head, along with a lonely feeling I’ve felt plenty of times.

Hunter walks out and closes the door behind him, and I can’t hold it in anymore. Tears flood my eyes. My body feels as though it’s been torn to shreds by knives. With my good arm, I push my underwear down and ever-so-slowly place myself on the toilet seat.

When I finish, I awkwardly wipe and tug my underwear back up, then slowly walk to the basin and wash my hands. Looking up, I’m shocked by the reflection staring back at me. One of my cheeks is colored with purple bruising mixed with healing scratches, and above my eyebrow, butterfly Band-Aids hold a cut together. My fingers slide over the bruise and hover over the bandage.

Miles, my brother, did this.

Everything comes flooding back as soon as I think his name. The gunshot. Running for my life. Hunter finding me in the bushes. My body trembles at the thought of nearly dying once again.

The bathroom door slowly opens, and my heart races. I stumble slightly, but Hunter

is at my side, steadying me within seconds. "I've got you," he whispers against my damp cheek.

Leaning back, I stare into those haunting eyes. "It was Miles."

He simply nods, his mouth pursed.

I can see Miles' face, that daunting black stare boring a hole into my soul. There was so much venom and hate in how he spoke to me.

He wanted me dead.

"Is he...dead?" I choke on the last word. My right hand grips Hunter's shirt so tightly my nails are pressing into my skin through the fabric.

"Here, let's get you back to bed. May is bringing you some soup if you're up for it."

Just the mention of food has my stomach grumbling loudly.

Hunter smiles. "Well, I think that solves that. Come here." Again, he scoops me up and carries me back to bed, where he's propped some pillows to help me sit up.

After he places me in bed, he turns to leave, but I reach out and take his hand. His grip tightens on mine, and my chest tightens with affection. "Please don't leave me," I say, staring up at him with pleading eyes. I don't want to be alone. The last time he left me, I became the hunted.

Turning back toward me, he squeezes my hand. "I'm not leaving. I've just got a phone call to make, and then I'll be back. I'll be right out there." He points to the patio, leans over, and presses his lips to my hair. "I'll never let you out of my sight again."

I begrudgingly release his hand, and my eyes follow him out of the room onto the patio.

A couple of minutes later, May walks in carrying a tray of food, and never in my life have I been happier to see someone than I am at this moment, except when I saw Hunter come for me in the woods. Relief washes over me, and all of my emotions slam into me like a freight train. My hand comes up and covers my face, and I can't stop the flow of tears from my eyes.

"Oh, honey." In seconds, May is by my side, wrapping me in arms that should have comforted me as I grew up, but she's here now, and that's all that matters.

The pain in my chest is a mixture of fear and hurt. I never wanted to be put in that situation again like the one six months ago when Hunter saved me, and yet there I was, staring down the barrel of a gun held by my blood relative.

Shouldn't he have been on my side? Shouldn't he have cared for me like a brother should?

"Let it all out, honey. I'm right here."

My sobs fill the bedroom, only the sound of the sliding door opening and closing breaks through. Hunter doesn't say anything, but I know he's still here. I sense him close by and believe him when he says he'll never let me out of his sight again. It's a small comfort. Still, it doesn't settle the anxiety that now fills me, causing my heart to race as though it's about to escape my chest.

I don't know how long passes before the tears finally settle and I'm able to speak. I lean back, and May releases me, offering me a down-turned smile. I must look like a hot mess, tears still running down my face. "Sorry," I mumble, wiping my face.

May's hand comes up and rests against my cheek. "You have nothing to be sorry about. You went through something traumatic, and I'm here for you. No matter what." She holds my gaze. "Here. I have some food."

Turning around, she picks up the tray she walked in with off the floor and places it on the bed. It's a bed table, so the tray doesn't sit on my scratched-up legs, for which I'm grateful.

"It's chicken soup and some juice. If there's anything else you need, please let me know."

I smile even though, inside, I'm broken. "Thanks, May."

She rises from the bed and leaves the room, then Hunter comes and sits at my side.

"Do you need any help?" he asks gently.

"I think I can manage. Thanks, though."

Picking up the spoon, I take a little bit of the soup, and once it hits my tongue, it's like a party in my mouth. I've never tasted anything as good as this. My diet has been diner meals. The staff discount was an important factor in my budget.

I sense Hunter watching every move I make. Once I've eaten half the soup, I'm ready for more answers. I feel like I've waited long enough. Turning my head in his direction, I ask, "What happened to my brother?"

18

Hunter's body stiffens.

"I don't think we should be talking about this right now. You need to heal," he argues, but I can tell there's more to his words. He's hiding something.

I place the spoon beside the bowl and look back at him, a glare on my face. "I don't trust people easily, and right now, you're making it harder for me to trust you. Now, what happened to Miles?"

Hunter gets up from the bed, and it's as if he's about to leave the room. He heads toward the door, then pauses. "If you walk out that door, that's it. I'm done. I'll go." I hold my breath, waiting to see what he does.

Surprisingly, he doesn't leave. He moves to the end of the bed, standing before me. "Your brother is dead."

Four simple words slam into me. I rub my eyes, but no tears form. I'm not even entirely sure what I should be feeling. I didn't know Miles, and it was obvious he was an evil person.

"How do you know he's dead? Did you do it?" I choke on the words.

He shakes his head. "I was too busy looking for you. Landon went after him."

The tightness in my chest eases a little, and then I recall something Miles said. "Did

you know he killed Nash?”

Hunter’s head flicks up. “What?” he growls out.

I clear my throat nervously. “Miles killed Nash.”

Hunter sighs. “Well, now I don’t feel so bad that Miles is dead.”

I don’t feel bad either. Nash was nice to me. He looked out for me even when it wasn’t his job. He died because of me, and there’s nothing I can do to repay him. Tears fill my eyes as I glance up at Hunter. He rushes to my side of the bed, sitting on the edge.

“This is all my fault.” My voice shakes, and I know I’m about to cry again. I swallow, hoping it will pass. But everything hurts with each breath.

Hunter moves closer, taking my face in his hands and looking me dead in the eyes. “This isn’t your fault. Nash was willing to die to protect you. I knew that, and so did your grandmother.”

He leans over and presses his lips to my forehead. I close my eyes, taking in the tender moment. As much as I don’t want to trust him, he’s one person who is looking out for me, even though he has an alternate agenda regarding the family business and overtaking his father.

“I’m not strong enough for this. Death isn’t something I wish upon people, and I don’t think I could do it or order someone to do it.” I shake my head at the thought of doing something like that.

“Aelina, you just have to trust me to make the decisions.”

I furrow my brow. “You make the decisions? So, I marry you, and what? Become your little mistress to ignore and use as you wish?”

“No. That’s not my intention at all. I want you to stand by me and for us to run this together. As one.” His fingers glide down my cheek, and my body tingles.

His touch is like a flame to my dead heart. A heart that’s not felt this kind of connection, maybe ever, and I’m craving it so badly.

I can’t, though.

I turn my head away. “I’m tired. Can you leave, please?”

Hunter looks at me, puzzled. I don’t want to get hurt, and Hunter is sure to be the one to hurt me.

He stands, taking the tray from my lap. “I’ll take this. Rest up.” As much as I’m sure he wants to, he can’t hide the hurt in his response.

Mr. Tough Guy isn’t so tough.

* * *

When Hunter left, I ended up taking a three-hour nap. The pain medication that May placed on my tray completely knocked me out. When I woke, Hunter was still gone, so now I’m left to my own devices.

I pick up my phone and notice a message from Hunter.

Hunter:

Message me when you wake. I'm out helping May.

I chew my bottom lip. Do I want to message him? I need the bathroom again, but I don't want his help.

I manage to sit up with just bearable pain, and my feet find the soft mat. I test my legs by standing and holding onto the bed as I get my bearings. Everything seems fine. So I slowly lift my hands off the mattress and take small steps toward the bathroom. My pace isn't fast, but it's steady, and the pain is tolerable.

When I finally make it inside, I slowly do what I need to do, but the fact that I can do it on my own is reassuring. As I'm about to open the door, the handle pulls down before the door swings open.

Hunter stands there, his eyebrows pinched in concern. "Why didn't you let me know? I would have come and helped you." He opens the door farther, and I steadily walk past him.

"I didn't need your help. As you can see, I can manage just fine, even with one arm."

He blows out an exasperated breath. "Aelina, I know you're trying to be Little Miss Independent, but you don't have to be. You can trust us to help you." He follows close behind me as I slowly return to the bed.

Once I'm settled, I look up at him. "Trust...that's a pretty powerful word. One I don't take lightly. Like I said, I don't trust you. You only want me to help you throw your dad out of his seat." I shrug, then wince.

That was a bad idea.

My good hand comes up to my shot shoulder.

Hunter clenches his fists and releases them. “Aelina, I know you have trust issues, given what you’ve been through. I promise you’ll get a say in everything if we do this together. I need you by my side.” He appears so calm and collected, making it hard to discern what’s really going through his head.

“Look, I don’t want to talk about this entire situation anymore.” I point to the television on the wall in front of the bed. “How about you get me some food and watch something with me?”

I’ll give him an inch and see where it goes, even if the unease in my stomach pulls tightly at the thought of allowing someone into my life. I don’t miss what appears to be a slight grin on Hunter’s face before he disappears out the door.

This isn’t how I planned my life, and I don’t know how things would have ended up if I’d grown up here. Perhaps I wouldn’t have been this jittery person who doesn’t trust people. For all I know, Hunter could have turned out to be a vile man like his father if I just happened to be there, ready for him to marry.

I’m somewhat thankful that I’ve lived a tough life. It’s given me more perspective on things and people in general.

I can only hope that Hunter will be someone I can rely on.

After a few days of bed rest, my cuts are healing nicely. It's mostly just a handful that still have some stitches and my shoulder, which gives me pain to the point where I'll wake in agony, covered in sweat.

Hunter has been sleeping in my bed with me, and I find it comforting. Over the last four nights, it's become a routine that neither of us have spoken about. Simply listening to his breathing settles my racing heart.

I still have thoughts of Miles coming back for me, even though I know he's dead. But Hunter settles those thoughts because I know he's here.

May has been with me whenever Hunter has had to leave to take care of business. It's always with Landon when he does, which makes me feel better about him going. For some reason, the idea of him going alone doesn't sit right with me.

"I think you should still rest. You don't want to bust a stitch," Hunter argues.

Too bad for him that I've already pulled myself out of bed and gotten dressed. "I need fresh air. I want out of this room. There are only so many action movies I can watch."

He huffs. "Fine." Then he walks out of the room, leaving the door open.

He knows I can manage just fine without him, and I think that's what makes him all protective because I don't need him so much anymore.

I select a long summery floral dress from the closet. Thankfully, my clothes were brought in from my other room a few days ago.

I'm not sure how I'll react when I step back in there.

This room is Hunter's. His bed smells like him, and I decide I like it. When we'd watch movies, I would find myself wanting to hold his hand and shuffle closer to him, only I didn't want him to think it meant anything. And when he fell asleep before me, I'd reach over and rest my hand on his shoulder. Somehow, it would soothe my nerves, making it easier to shut my eyes.

Undoing my shirt buttons, I slip my arms out and stare at the dress, deciding how best to pull it over my head since I can't really lift my arm. During this recovery process, I discovered that button-ups are easier with my shoulder, but I didn't think things through, opting for something I need to pull over my head.

I decide pulling it up from the bottom might be easier, but as I'm bending over to pull it up, a shiver runs down my spine. I instantly whip around to find Hunter staring at me, hunger in his eyes.

My heart rate jumps, but I don't scream at him to get out. In fact, I don't mind that he saw me.

"Want to help?" I swallow.

Hunter stands there, watching silently. And a new sensation settles over me. With one look, this man sets my body off like a live wire, and I find myself trying to swallow again, but my mouth has gone dry.

Finally, he steps closer, and his hands come to my exposed hips as I continue to try and wriggle the dress up. The sudden contact and my compromised position make my

breath hitch. He stares down at me, his hands gliding up from my waist over my ribs and stopping at the nape of my neck. My entire body feels like it might combust on the spot.

My good hand comes up and rests on his.

Our eyes connect, then I glance at his lips and back up again. He catches the movement, and I step closer to him. Butterflies swarm my stomach, goose bumps covering my flesh from how his eyes bore into mine.

In one swift move, his head comes down, and his mouth crashes into mine. My hand roams up into his hair, gripping tight. He breaks the kiss, trailing his mouth down my neck, and I welcome it, my head falling back, eagerly allowing him access.

I need this connection.

I need him .

A groan escapes my lips, and Hunter's mouth is back on mine. It's like a wrestle of who can overpower who. He's electrified every nerve ending in my body and heightened them tenfold. His arms wrap around me, and he pulls me against him. I hiss in pain, and as quickly as he took my mouth, he drops his arms, taking a step back.

"I'm sorry. I know I said I wouldn't do that again," Hunter apologizes, but his eyes are flaring with the same heat I'm feeling.

I want, no, need, his touch. We're like fire and ice. He's the fire, always hot and demanding, and I'm the ice, cold and distant. I step close, deciding to take a chance again. My hand comes up to his lightly stubbled face. "It's okay," I whisper, then pop up on my tiptoes, pulling him to me.

This time, the kiss isn't as hungry as the one before. We taste each other, and I know in my heart that I need to put my trust in him.

Pulling back, he stares at me. There's a flare of desire burning in his eyes.

"Let's go for a walk," I offer, knowing things need to cool down.

His lips pull up into a smile, and he nods.

"But first, let me finish getting ready."

"If you weren't injured, I'd not let you finish getting dressed," he says, a low rumble in his chest that makes my stomach clench with excitement.

We've shared many kisses, but I'm sure they're nothing compared to what he's like between the sheets. Just the thought makes my thighs tremble, and a need builds deep within.

I know my cheeks are rosy, but I don't try to hide them. "While that is tempting, I still need to trust you."

His lips form a thin line, but he says nothing. I know what I said hit a nerve. I need him to show me he trusts me. Only then, maybe I can allow him to hold the piece of my heart that I've held close and protected my whole life.

* * *

Hunter finishes helping me get ready and says he has to make a few phone calls. There is a shift between us, but I'm not sure if it's good or bad.

I slowly walk past my old room, and thankfully, the door is shut. My legs become

weak, and I'm not sure I'll make it past. I stop, taking deep breaths, steadying my racing, anxious heart.

Once in control, I continue, and with each step, the weakness leaves my legs.

I take an apple and carrot from the refrigerator, slipping on the boots May gave me. Then, I head out the back door toward the barn.

I know I'll eventually have to face that bedroom, but it's still too fresh in my mind right now.

Pulling open the barn door, I catch May mucking out the stalls. She looks up at the sound of the door squeaking. "Hey, honey. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. I'm sick of looking at the four walls of the bedroom."

She places the shovel against the stall door and removes her gloves, opening her arms and embracing me gently. I inhale her peppermint and lavender scent and can't help but relax a little in the comfort. "Did you have to fight Hunter to let you out?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes. He seems to think I need to be wrapped in cotton wool."

May takes my good hand. "Hunter isn't one who shows his emotions."

She isn't wrong.

"The night that Miles came here, and Hunter found you in the paddock? I've never seen him so scared."

Perhaps I'll get the answers I want from May since Hunter won't give me anything.

I shift on my feet. “What exactly happened that night? My mind is blank, and Hunter won’t talk to me about it. I think I deserve answers.”

May nods as she turns and closes the stall door. “Come with me. Let’s go sit out here.” She gestures to the back of the barn.

She leads me to a timber swing chair overlooking the paddock. It’s a beautiful spot. “Sit,” she says, and I happily join her. “Your grandfather made this chair.” She touches the armrest and rubs it gently.

The chains holding the chair to the frame are slightly rusted but still appear sturdy enough. Its white paint is worn and chipping away but still has an elegance to it. I wonder if any of my siblings have had the opportunity to sit here, but I decide I don’t want the answer. I’m just grateful to be here now.

It’s big enough for us to sit comfortably, and I turn my attention to May. “It’s beautiful,” I gush.

There’s a small silence before she speaks. “Now, the other night. I don’t want to cause you any pain in reliving it, but can you tell me what happened? Your version of what you can remember.”

I take in the greenery before me, fields of grassy pastures full of horses, cows, and sheep, and it reminds me that I’m safe, even though something so tragic happened.

Taking a deep breath, I start from the beginning. “I was about to have a bath when the power went out. Then I saw him, and all I remember was that he shot me, and I ran. He also told me that he’s working with Hunter’s father and that he killed Nash.” My words crack as I mention Nash’s name, and May simply nods, catching me off-guard. “Did you know?”

Again, she nods. “Yes. I always suspected. Miles was an angry boy because Nash got the attention that he sought.”

“Landon killed Miles.”

“I know. He’s now buried where Nash and your grandfather are. He’s family, and I need to have him here even though I know what he’s done is unforgivable.”

My brows pull down in confusion. I understand her reasoning, though I don’t think he deserves special treatment.

“Anyway.” She continues, “After Landon dealt with Miles, Hunter ran after you. He’d seen you run into that shrub area over there.” She points in the direction I don’t even remember heading. “When he found you, you were very weak from loss of blood, and you were covered with it. It was the most horrifying sight I had ever seen. Hunter was frantic. Take a moment to think about him becoming unhinged and double that. He raced you inside and called a doctor he knows. I said you needed to go to the hospital, but he kept saying it was too dangerous.”

Fear twists in my stomach. “Obviously, everything was all right since I’m still here.” I try to make a joke of it, and May smiles. Though I know both of us are thinking the same thing— I could have died.

“Anyway, the doctor had to keep you knocked out for twenty-four hours so that your body could replenish the blood it lost, and you were hooked up to IVs for that time as well.” That I don’t remember, and they weren’t there when I woke up. “Don’t worry, dear. The doctor removed them while you slept. You’re a tough girl.”

“How was Hunter?”

“Like I said, he was frantic, but when he knew you’d be all right, so was he. He never

left your side. He wanted to be there when you woke up. He blames himself for leaving you. I blame myself as well.” She hangs her head.

I reach over and take her hand, squeezing it. “Everything is all right. I’m alive, and things are right in the world.”

“If it were only that simple. Hunter’s father suspects Hunter has betrayed him.”

I pull back, my breath ceasing as the worry snakes its way through me. “What do you mean? Is Hunter in danger?”

“Oh no, honey. Hunter can handle himself. Plus, he has Landon. What I mean is that I think his father suspects Hunter is keeping you away from him. Hunter has told him that he’s still searching for you.”

I swallow the lump that’s formed in my throat. “What does Hunter intend to do when his father finds me? Because if Miles found me, it’s only a matter of time, right?”

“I’m not sure. But I know he’ll do everything in his power to keep you safe.”

20

May's words keep rolling through my head.

Standing at Snowflake's stall, I feed her the carrot and apple I brought from the house.

Hunter isn't her grandson, and still, she trusts him like he is.

Snowflake's wet nose nudges against my face, and I pull back, laughing as I reach out, rubbing my hand down her neck and noting how soft her coat is. She's either seeking all the attention or looking for more to eat.

"When you're healed, I'd love to teach you how to ride." I jump, spinning to face Hunter.

Turning back to Snowflake, I give her another pat. "I'd like that," I say, smiling with the memory of Hunter's and my moment this morning fresh in my mind. I can still feel where his hands ran over my skin. It now burns as a reminder. "You're making it very hard for me not to trust you."

I hear a low chuckle behind me. "I want you to trust me. Hopefully, I'm showing you that I can be someone you can rely on."

He knows exactly what he's doing, and it's working. My defenses are slowly beginning to crumble. The problem is, I still remember the deal we'd made. Whoever succumbs to the other first gets what they want.

Only now, I'm not sure I want to leave anymore. I love May, and I love feeling loved and cared for, which is something I've never experienced before. Could I be with Hunter and live with the possibility of becoming something I never thought I would have to? A possible killer?

Turning to him, I say, "You remember saying I'm only here because I was promised to you?" Folding his arms, he nods. "Is that true?"

My heart hammers in my chest. Deep down, I don't want it to be the reason—I want him to actually want me. Possibly even love me one day when the time is right.

The way his eyes roam over my face, there's no hardness or glare. Instead, there's softness and something else. He moves closer, and my skin prickles with awareness. "Little Red, we all say a lot of things in the heat of the moment."

It's as though a weight lifts off my chest that I didn't realize was sitting there. "Oh..." I can't help the grin that touches my lips and my cheeks heat.

"Do you want to go for a walk?"

"Sure." I smile, letting Hunter lead the way out the barn's back door.

My gaze lands on the porch swing. There must be so many childhood memories here for my family. My brothers mainly, since it seems they got a much better upbringing than my own, and now both are gone. I'll never get to know the things they enjoyed growing up, and a new sadness settles in my chest.

"What's on your mind?" Hunter's question pulls me out of my thoughts.

I sigh. "I was thinking about the childhood my brothers had here and how I'll never hear their stories."

Hunter gives me a sideways glance.

“What?” I ask. Why is he looking at me like that?

“You really want to know about Miles?” His expression tells me that I’m crazy.

Oddly enough, I do. “Yes. Surely, he couldn’t have always been this bad person he turned into.”

Hunter takes my free hand and gives it a little squeeze. He doesn’t let it go either. “You’re a good person, Little Red.”

This is a different, more friendly side of Hunter. He appears carefree, not the uptight, suit-wearing, stone-faced man I’ve witnessed so many times before. He’s wearing dark blue jeans with a black tee—nice, casual, and damn attractive. The suits are a different level of hotness, but this country-boy look he’s pulling off makes me want to ravage him.

Clearing my throat, I say, “It’s not an easy thing for me to be open with people. With you, I’m trying. Just don’t hurt me.”

I catch the side of his mouth pull up. Hunter walks me into the forest behind the barn, following a cleared path into the trees, not the shrubs I ran for the other night on the other side. This path is clear, and trees and shrubs line the sides, a gravel path leading the way.

“You know, I grew up with Nash and Miles.”

I glance at him with wide eyes. “What were they like?”

“Well, I mostly hung out with Nash. We were joined at the hip, as May puts it.” He

laughs. “We were always out the back here, climbing trees, building forts, and just being boys.”

Hearing those memories makes me smile. Knowing that my brothers had a good life makes me happy.

Hunter steals a glance at me, then questions, “Are you sure you’re okay hearing this?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be? I want to know about my family.”

Hunter is silent for a moment. “Because this would have been your childhood, too, if you weren’t taken away.”

I didn’t really think about that. Now it’s been brought up, I won’t be able to let it go.

“I think growing up how I have has made me a stronger, more resilient person. If I’d simply become your wife after growing up in this life, your life, I may not have had the strength for survival I do now. I know it’s a foolish way to look at things, but I’ve been angry for so long, and now I have a chance to get to know my family.” I chew my lips as a lump forms in my throat.

“Tell me about how you grew up?” he asks gently.

I laugh. “Why are you asking when you probably already know if you’ve kept tabs on me?”

He cocks an eyebrow. “I didn’t always have eyes on you. I knew the area you had been in, and yes, I had people around keeping an eye out for you because I knew one day you’d be special not only to me but to the rest of your family.”

My chest tightens at his words. Clearing my throat, I say, “Let’s just say I’ve lived on the streets and survived because of the friendships I made with other homeless people.”

Hunter frowns. “What happened between you and your foster family?”

“Which one? I was in and out of quite a few homes until I turned eighteen, and I just packed my stuff and left.” I shrug, thinking back to that time when I couldn’t wait to get out of that abusive home.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that. I don’t think that was May’s or your mother’s mom’s plan at all. What happened to make you leave the last home?” His jaw tenses as he asks.

“The father was a drunk, and everyone in the house, including their biological kids, copped the abuse. If we had bruises, we didn’t go to school. Hardly any food was in the house at times because he would drink it all away, and the final straw was when, because I wasn’t his daughter and I was older, he thought it was okay to try stuff on me, and I wasn’t having any of it so I left.”

Hunter is silent for a moment. That was a lot of information for him to take in and process. I squeeze his hand reassuringly, and this jolts him out of his thoughts.

“Sorry, Nash or I should have helped you sooner. I’m so sorry for what you went through.”

“It’s okay. I’m here now, and this is much better than what I had, and I’m grateful for it.”

We both fall silent for a moment, the sounds of the different bird calls filling the area around us until Hunter breaks the silence. “Have you read Nash’s letter?”

My chest squeezes. I shake my head. “No, not yet. I’m not sure I’m ready.”

The birds are singing around us as we walk, and the breeze gently kisses my skin.

“Ah...here we are.”

I follow Hunter’s line of sight. Sitting there amongst some overgrown shrubs is an old wooden playhouse. It isn’t huge, but it appears to be big enough to fit three adult-size bodies inside, I’m sure of it. There’s what looks to be mold growing on the wood, and some of the tin roof has rusted. A small sheet of the roof has come off or maybe blown away in a storm or something, but with a little TLC, it would come up nicely.

“Wow,” I breathe out.

“Welcome to the shack.” He laughs. “This is where Nash and I hung out. Your grandfather built this for us. We kept hounding him, and finally, he gave in.”

“This is great.” I release Hunter’s hand and move closer to inspect it. “I guess it’s been a while since you were out here.”

“Well, yes and no. Nash and I stopped playing here when we were dragged off to work for our fathers. Your mother and father were already in the deep end with families of the underworld because of what had happened to you and your sisters. Things became tense with our families, and I wasn’t allowed to spend time with Nash anymore.”

“I sense there’s a but.”

Hunter kicks a stick, and then his head comes up. “Yes, there is. Later, Nash wanted me to meet him here, and this is where he told me he’d found you and his other

sisters.” My chest suddenly grows tight, and I open my mouth to speak, but Hunter holds up his hand to stop me. “What I didn’t mention to him was that I’d already been searching for you.”

I swallow. “Me?”

“Yes. Only you. When I was eighteen, I knew about you and your family’s betrayal. When I was twenty-one, I sent Landon to find you.”

A memory comes to the front of my mind. “When I lived under the bridge, there was a man there.”

He nods.

“That was Landon?”

“Yes. I wanted him to keep his distance, only observe.”

“I remember a man. He scared me. Though when I look at him now, I don’t remember him.” All the times I’ve seen Landon around the barn, his face has never clicked with my memory.

“He’s great at hiding in the shadows. That’s his specialty.”

“Specialty?” I cock my head to the side.

Hunter shoves his hands in his pocket and walks around the shack. “Yeah, he’s good at certain things.”

“What? Like an assassin?” I laugh.

He stops walking and stares at me. He's not making a joke. "If that's what you want to call it."

I rub my forehead. "This is all so much for me to wrap my head around."

He opens his mouth, but I cut in. "Don't tell me any more right now. I don't want this moment ruined by all the dark stuff that will cloud me for the rest of my life."

"All right. So what else do you want to know?"

Hesitantly, I ask, "Can you take me to where Nash and Miles are buried?"

"Sure, if that's what you want."

"It is, but I have another favor."

"Anything."

"Can you get Nash's letter from my original bedroom in the bedside drawer and the photos of my sisters?"

Hunter takes my hand, leading me away from his and Nash's playhouse—a place I now feel connected to.

I remember Nash and his constant teasing of me, just for fun. I shake my head at the memory. Then, I'd thought he had a crush on me. Looking back, he was just being a big brother, bothering his little sister. That realization makes my heart swell with so much love for him.

21

Impatiently, I wait on the porch for Hunter to return with the things I'd asked for. I rub my neck and play with my hair, trying to keep myself busy.

Hunter steps through the door. "Are you ready?"

I swallow. "Yeah, I think so. I'm not sure how to be ready for something like this."

He stands in front of me and leans over, placing a light kiss on my lips. Butterflies take flight in my stomach. "I'm here for you," he whispers and takes my hand, guiding me off the porch.

We walk in silence for about five minutes and come upon a part of the land fenced off with eight headstones inside the perimeter. Some look really old. In stark contrast, there's a fresh mound of dirt—an unmarked grave.

Miles.

Chills roll over my skin. Goose bumps follow, and I can't hide the shiver that runs through me.

There's a bench outside the fence where Hunter walks us to, and I sit. When he doesn't join me, I ask, "Are you going to sit?"

He shakes his head. "No. This is something you need to do, and when you're ready, I'll be back there." He points to a grouping of trees in a small clearing and a bench

seat. Then he hands me the envelope and pictures, my stomach instantly twisting in knots.

“Okay,” I reply.

He kisses my cheek and leaves me to my thoughts. I take a moment and look over the headstones. Nash’s has freshly picked bright yellow and black sunflowers resting on it.

I think May must have put them there , and a lump forms in my throat. She’s lost so much. How does she stay so strong in the face of all this death?

“Why couldn’t you be here to teach me to trust? I trusted you,” I whisper to Nash’s headstone. Tears form in my eyes, and I take the envelope, carefully opening it. My hands shake as I unfold the white piece of paper.

Dearest Lina,

If you’re reading this instead of seeing my gorgeous face, then obviously, something has happened. I’m sorry I can’t be with you to walk you through this hard stage of discovering who your family is and what’s yet to come.

When I found you in that diner, I thought I was looking at a younger version of our mother. I do hope you get to meet her because she is amazing. Hunter knows how to find her, and when the time is right, he’ll bring her to you. I kept her safe from our father since he thought she was behind all his daughters disappearing. He was raised by a strong woman and didn’t see what she was doing. Good one, Granny.

You have to know that what our grandmothers did was for your own good. They didn’t want you to grow up in a world that could easily have killed you before you’d had the chance to live. Hell, look at me. Most likely, dead. I’m sorry I couldn’t keep

you protected from the horrors of our family life. You have a chance to make it better than what it is. You and Hunter. I'm sure if Hunter had a sister, I would have been married off to her, and you then would have been safe. Instead, they had a family of boys. Lucky them.

Now, I'm sure you've got a million questions. Don't be afraid to ask May or Hunter. They'll help you. Hunter will keep you safe. I trust him with my life.

I know you've had a hard life. I know the foster homes were not kind to you and that living under a bridge wasn't ideal, but you are so strong. You have the strength needed for this, even if you don't think you do.

I love you, Little Red. That name came from me, by the way. You came home from the hospital in a red outfit, wrapped in a beautiful red blanket that Granny made you. I was two, and Granny read me Little Red Riding Hood, and from then on, I called you Little Red, and so did Hunter. We were and still are really good friends.

Trust Hunter. Trust Granny, and know that I love you. I'm so thankful I got to meet and get to know you, even if only a little. Promise me that when you and Hunter take over, you'll find your sisters and keep them safe. They're amazing women—exactly like their big sister.

I better stop writing before I start crying. Remember, I love you.

Forever in your heart,

Nash

PS. I'm sure Dad is hot on your tail. He may seem nasty and angry, but he's really not that bad. He's had everything taken away from him. He was a great father. I will tell you to be careful because he does tend to lash out. Just give him a moment to be

angry and remember he only wants to be on top again like he once was.

I carefully fold the letter and place it back into the envelope. My gaze comes to a halt on Nash's headstone again. A breeze whips past me, and there's a coolness on my cheeks from the tears that continue to fall. My heart is full yet heavy. Even Nash wants me to trust Hunter and find my sisters. I'm not about to look for them until I know it's safe for them to know me.

And who knows how long that will be?

My good arm wraps around me with a sudden bout of coolness, sending chills up my spine. I have no idea what I'm going to do.

"How are you?"

I turn my head. My eyes feel puffy as I stare at Hunter's. He truly is what I would call perfect, so much so that it hurts my heart.

I nod solemnly and turn back to the resting place of my family. Hunter sits beside me, and as he does, he wraps his arm around my shoulders. I shuffle closer to him, wanting his comfort and warmth. His hand rubs up and down my arm, like he read my mind.

"I know what everyone expects me to do. I'm just not sure I'm ready or that I can even do this." I clear the thickness coating my throat.

"You keep saying that. If you really wanted, I could teach you to defend yourself and..." he takes a deep breath, "... and I could teach you how to handle a gun."

My stomach clenches. I don't move. "Is that really the best thing? What if I shoot the wrong person? An innocent person? Shooting anyone scares the hell out of me." My

breaths come faster.

“Hey, you’re jumping ahead, and you don’t need to. It would be a precaution because you’d mostly have a bodyguard with you.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about others putting their lives on the line for me.” The idea doesn’t sit right. If I thought I was scared about using a gun, the mere thought of someone else’s life being cut short because of me rattles me to my core.

“What did Nash say?” he asks.

“Here. You can read it.” I hand the letter to him.

“Oh, I don’t want—”

“It’s okay. I want you to read it since it appears we’re in this together.”

“Are you sure?” I turn toward him, his face all kinds of tender and handsome. His hand comes up, brushing some hair away from my face. “You really are beautiful.”

My chest tightens, and I offer him a weak smile, placing my hand on his leg.

While Hunter reads the letter, I take in the scenery. The burial family plot is over to the side of the barn and house. This property is massive and full of greenery and life. This home, the entire property, has been built with love. Beautiful gardens full of roses, sunflowers, and little daisies surround the family graves.

I make a mental note to come often and place flowers on Nash’s grave. Perhaps one day, when I can find forgiveness, I can do the same for Miles’ as well.

“I remember Nash referred to you as Little Red. It was so fitting. It’s just a name that

seems to have stuck.” Hunter laughs and rubs his hand across his face as he finishes reading the letter. Then he folds it up and hands it back. “He really was a good guy, and he is speaking the truth about your father. He is an angry man because he lost a lot after he didn’t keep his promise to my family, but know that anger is a powerful motivator.”

“But he seemed so dangerous when I saw him outside my apartment. It was as if he’d love to kill me.”

Hunter takes my hand. “No, I don’t think he’d hurt you. He would, however, have taken you to my father. Then, of course, my father would probably kill you to exact vengeance for what happened. And knowing my father, he would kill yours after.”

I pull back a little. His words aren’t harsh, but they hold such power, and I hate how spiteful this world is.

“I think I know what I need to do,” I finally say after a moment of pondering.

“What’s that?”

“You and I have to come together and change the way this underworld is run. I want to have a voice for those who are growing up like me. Even if that’s not what you do, it’s something I want.”

Hunter beams, then leans over and presses his lips to mine. When he pulls back, he says, “Your eyes are about to be opened to all opportunities, and I’m here to help you, just like you’re there to support me. We can do this. Together.”

22

“You’re going to die.” Miles stares at me with such hate, his eyes alight with the devil’s fire.

I move in an attempt to run. My body doesn’t budge. My hands and feet are bound. I jump and trip. My body slams onto a bed of broken glass, and I scream out in pain.

“Please leave me alone,” I plead. My eyes well up with tears. I wriggle my wrists, and the rope burns into my skin.

“You will join our brother in a grave.” He laughs, sending chills down my spine. The gun he’s holding comes up, pointing directly at my head. “Say hi to Nash for me.”

He pulls the trigger.

I bolt upright. My clothes cling to my damp body. My hand grips my chest.

My eyes dart around the room. “No, he’s dead. He can’t hurt me anymore,” I whisper.

To the left of me, the bed is empty. Hunter has been occupying that space since I was injured, and now he’s not here when I need him. My stomach is a ball of knots that tighten each time I recall the dream.

It felt so real.

Steadying my breath, I hear some faint voices.

“She isn’t ready to meet your father.” May sounds angry.

It’s been a week since I told Hunter I’d join him. Things between us are still the same — we kiss, touch, and explore each other, but he seems to think I’m still fragile. My sling is off, and the doctor came and checked my shoulder. She’s given me some exercises to slowly and gently rebuild its strength.

“She is ready, May.” Hunter sighs. “Aelina is stronger than you realize.”

“I’m sure she is, but I didn’t want her in this life. I didn’t want it for any of my children. Growing up in this darkness is all I know, and I don’t want her to only know the darkness too.”

I climb out of bed and slip out my door, tiptoeing down the hallway and stopping in the shadows to listen.

“May, the way she was brought up wasn’t the greatest. She is stronger than you give her credit for. I knew it from the moment I first saw her.”

“Hunter...” She sighs.

“She’ll be fine.”

I step out from the shadows. “I’ll be fine for what?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

Two shocked faces turn toward me.

“How much did you hear?” Hunter questions.

May appears exasperated. “Something about meeting your father,” I say.

They look at each other, then back to me. “I’m sick of the secrets. Secrets are what got us into this problem in the first place.” I point to May. “You, removing my sisters and me from our family. Your heart was in the right place, and for all you knew, Hunter could have been exactly like his father...” I pause, rubbing my forehead. “I just don’t want any more secrets. I don’t want the same mistakes repeated.”

“She’s right,” May practically whispers. “This is all my fault.”

I rush to her side. “No, don’t think like that. You did what you thought was right. If you didn’t do it, I probably wouldn’t be who I am today. We can’t ponder the what-ifs of our life. We can only focus on the present and the future.” I take her in my arms and hug her tightly.

She nods into my shoulder. “Thank you. It still doesn’t make me feel any better, though.”

Stepping back, she runs her hand down my cheek and walks down the hallway. Seeing her so deflated hurts. I don’t want her to have these feelings of guilt. It’s all in the past. I’ve let it go, and I can only hope she does too.

Hunter comes up beside me. “She will be all right.” He turns to me. “Why are you awake?”

Clearing my throat, I say, “I had a bad dream, then heard you both attempting to argue quietly. It wasn’t quiet.” I give him a pointed look.

“Sorry about that.” He takes my hand, and a flutter stirs in my stomach. Every touch between us is like this. After leading me back to the bedroom, he closes the door behind him. “Tell me about your dream.” He releases my hand and slides back into

his side of the bed.

I'm silent as I join him, but he doesn't push. Taking a breath, I say, "It was about Miles." My throat swells at the mention of his name.

Hunter takes my hand again. "He isn't here anymore," he reassures, his voice gentle and calming.

Tears start again, and I don't try to stop them. "I'm sorry. I feel so stupid. I know he's dead. I know he's not going to kill me. But what if someone does the job for him? What if my father comes for me next?"

"Hey, it's okay." Hunter pulls me onto his lap. Wrapping my arms around him, I bury my face in his neck, and the tears keep coming. "I've got you." Hunter tangles his hand into my long hair, pressing his warm lips to my cheek.

My body ignites, coming alive to his lips and hands. Laying back, I stare at him. He wipes away the tears on my cheeks, then leans into me, his mouth claiming mine. Within seconds, he has me flat on my back, hovering over the top of me.

Gripping the bottom of his shirt, I pull it over his head, and my eyes eat up the delicious view before me. I pull his mouth back to mine, needing to be close to him, touch him, and explore him.

"I want you, Little Red. All of you."

My body throbs with need. I want him too.

His hand slides up under my tank top. Thank goodness I'm not wearing a bra.

"Easy access," he breathes out against my lips, and my shirt is gone moments later.

My heart opens a little more with every kiss, touch, and nip. The feeling of being wanted and cared for is unlike anything I've ever experienced.

Hunter's tender kisses etch themselves into my skin and memory. The way he claims my body is savage and sweet all at the same time. Our bodies press together as one, as though that's how we should have been all along.

* * *

Heat presses against my back. Memories from last night flood my thoughts, and a smile touches my lips as I wake.

I take a second for myself, enjoying the moment—the feelings. I've never felt wanted or even loved my entire life. This moment will be engraved in my heart for a long time and be something I will keep with me in the future.

Hunter's fingers glide up my arm. "Morning, beautiful." His husky morning voice makes my stomach tingle, a familiar ache in my core from last night.

I'm not sure anything could wipe this smile off my face.

"How did you know I was awake?" I ask, rolling over to face him.

Damn, he looks good. All his usual stress lines that show along his forehead aren't there. The dark, hard look that clouds his eyes has evaporated. They're bright and alive in this moment.

He brushes away the hair that falls across my face, and I want him to claim me all over again.

"Your breathing changed." He notices things like that?

The memory of the deal he growled at me when I first came here has me rethinking this entire situation.

“What’s going through that head of yours? Your entire body just changed.” His worry lines are back, and I know I’m the cause of them. Being the cause of his concern unsettles me. That’s the last thing I want.

“Oh...um...” I pause, my heart rate skyrocketing while Hunter holds my nervous gaze. “I was thinking about the deal we made.” The lines on his forehead pull down. “You know, the one about me getting my freedom or you getting me, depending on who gave in first.”

He sits, and I’ve completely killed the moment. “So you want to leave,” he bites out, his tone slicing my chest.

He’s climbing out of bed, but I grab his arm. “I never said I wanted to leave,” I respond gently.

He turns to face me, his once softened features now pinched with heavy creases of concern. “Then why bring it up?” He pretty much growls out the question.

My defenses automatically start building back up, preparing for a fight. “Forget I said anything about it,” I snap and climb out of bed, naked, and march my way to the bathroom, where I slam the door behind me.

My eyes burn from the tears wanting to fall. I won’t allow them to this time. One minute, he’s caring and kind. The next, he’s rough and dangerous. I don’t understand him, and the rapid back and forth is giving me whiplash.

Why can’t he see this is hard for me? Is it so wrong to want some reassurance through this? After what we shared last night, I simply want him here for me, just me

at some level.

I step into the shower and blast the heat over my ragged body. Some parts ache that I didn't even know could hurt. It was a wild ride last night with Hunter and one I hope to do again. Well, that's if he gets over himself.

I place my head under the cascading water, letting it wash away some of the tension. The heat is a reminder that this is life. Sometimes, it's rubbish, and in the end, we all die. But I'm not ready to die yet. I've got a family to meet and get to know.

Hearing the door, my head comes up. "Are you ready to pull your head from your ass?" I ask.

Hunter stands at the door for a second before stepping into the room and shutting it behind him. My already hot body starts to smolder. The way Hunter's eyes work their way down the entire length of my body, taking in everything, ignites my center.

He strips off his shorts, and I swallow. Knowing what's coming, my chest and throat tighten.

Hunter steps in, joining me, and I take in his perfectly chiseled body, the incredible six-pack, or is that an eight? His V has me biting my bottom lip.

"See something you like?" He laughs.

"That depends if he's decided to stop being such a dick."

"I'm sorry I was a dick." His arms wrap around my waist, pulling me against his wet body.

"Well, then, yes. I see something I like."

His mouth is on mine, hungry to taste me.

“So you don’t want to leave?” he asks between kisses along the nape of my neck, leading back up to my lips.

I groan. “It seems you’ve weaseled your way into my heart. I’m not sure I could walk away even if I wanted to.”

“Good, because you are mine.” He growls before claiming my body once again.

23

“Are you ready?” Hunter asks. “Now, make sure your arms are locked into position.”

I hold a gun, somewhat steady.

Hunter has been teaching me to defend myself for the last four weeks. He felt it was time I learned, considering the line of work I’m about to be thrown into.

I do as he says. “Is this right?” I question, looking to him for guidance. This isn’t the first time he’s talked me through this.

I’ve even had Landon help me when Hunter has had to go back into the city. But I think I’d prefer Landon to be looking after Hunter. Who knows what his father is capable of? If he could turn my family on me, then I’m sure he could turn his family on his son.

“Yes. Now, when you’re ready, you know what to do,” Hunter says.

Looking straight ahead, I line my shot up with the paper we have attached to the tree along the forest border. My arms are locked straight, and my chest thrums with excitement.

I squeeze the trigger, and the shot rings out. I want to shut my eyes in reaction to the loud bang that follows, but Hunter told me never to close them when shooting and to keep my eye on the target. The vibration from the shot runs along my arms. Adrenaline burns in my veins. It’s such a thrill.

“That was good. You hit the mark that time. Looks like Landon has been a good teacher.”

“He has.” I smile and point the gun down, turning to face Hunter and handing it over.

“For someone with his skills, I’d expect him to be a good teacher,” Hunter says dryly.

Landon is not much of a talker. He just instructs and expects perfection. “What skills?” I ask curiously.

Hunter looks up from where he was putting the gun away in its case. “I guess you should know. He’s an excellent marksman, great with any kind of gun or blade, and could easily kill you with his bare hands.”

I open my mouth to speak, but for a moment, nothing comes out. Then, I finally find my voice. “Assassin, that’s right.”

Hunter shrugs. “Yeah.”

I don’t know why it catches me off-guard, as he’s already insinuated what he does, but still, my eyes bug out. I think just hearing it again confirms it is a shock to the system. I mean, who wouldn’t be jarred by this after they have literally taken shooting lessons from the man?

I laugh nervously. Landon is Hunter’s hitman, who has probably killed so many people he’s lost count.

Hunter shrugs again, then stalks toward me. “Once you get to know him, you’ll see that he’s a big softy. Though, don’t ever let him hear you say that,” he says, whispering the last part.

Softy or not, Landon's glares could scare even the bravest person. I'd hate to get on his bad side.

Hunter's arm wraps around my waist and pulls me against his chest. His woodsy scent wraps around my senses, and my eyes fall upon his lips. I watch the smile stretch across his face.

He knows what his touch does to me, and my arms automatically latch themselves around his waist.

"That's enough lessons for today, I think." His voice is low and wanting, causing my stomach to twist.

"Do you have something else in mind?" I rock my body against him.

"You have no idea how much I'd love to devour you right here in this paddock, but I don't think May will approve." He chuckles, lowering his head, his mouth an inch away from mine. "There's nothing stopping me from taking your lips right now, though."

My breath hitches as his mouth smashes against mine. I pull him tighter against me. He moves his arms under my butt and lifts me with ease. I wrap my legs around him, the heat between us building.

He holds me close but doesn't move. The safety I feel in his arms is a new experience for me. The way he's so tender and caring, how could I not fall for him?

He pulls back after a moment, and I can't help the sigh that escapes my lips. I tilt my head to meet his heated gaze, which tells me he wants nothing more than to finish what we've just started. It's still really hard for me to believe this is happening. I never thought I'd ever find love. I actually have a family, even if half have passed

away, my future father-in-law wants to kill me, and I have sisters I didn't even know existed.

Then there's Hunter with his hard exterior. He has dangerous, unwavering power over people and, even more so, me. The way my body completely submits to him is unnerving. Of course, I want him, even though I can't shake the restless feeling I have when it comes to why he sought me out.

"Where did you go right now? You were looking at me, then your focus changed."

I unwrap myself from him. The weight is heavy on my chest. "I'm concerned about the whole situation."

Hunter becomes still, his focus all on me. "You mean us?"

"What? No. Not us, well maybe a little, but more so your family. I know the time is approaching for me when I'm going to come face-to-face with your father. What if he doesn't accept anything and purely wants me dead to spite my family?" My heart hammers against my chest as anxiety over what will become of me slams home.

Hunter steps closer to me, and his hand cups my cheek. I close my eyes, drinking in this moment. When he says nothing, I open them, and right away, I know I'm staring into the soul of a killer—someone fierce and unwavering.

My head draws back. He comes closer until our bodies are pressing against each other. The heat between us is an inferno I'm not sure I can tame. "He wouldn't dare lay a finger on you in a harmful way, or he would be a dead man. You are mine, Little Red, and anyone who wants to harm you will have to get through me." The vein in his neck pops out, and I swallow, waiting to see if he'll say more. The anger radiating from his face tells me he means every word he's said. "You are mine."

A tiny bit of peace washes over me. The way he speaks is powerful and smashes fully into my chest. Someone clears their throat behind me, breaking the moment.

I whip around. Landon .

“Sorry to interrupt. You’re needed. It’s important.” His eyes drop to me, and I immediately know it’s about me.

“What is it?” I ask.

“You don’t have to worry about it. We’ll take care of it.” Landon brushes aside my question.

I step toward him. “No. If I’m going to be a part of this world, then I have a right to know what’s going on.” I glance over at Hunter, who hasn’t moved. “No more secrets. All in or nothing.” I purse my lips and raise my eyebrows in a go-ahead-and-try-me way. I’m through with all the hidden agendas.

Hunter gives Landon a short nod, and I shift my gaze back to Landon. His furrowed brow tells me something is wrong.

Clearing his throat, he says, “They found Miriam...” He pauses, then his dark stare falls on me, and Hunter curses. “Your mother.”

My unease is back in full swing.

My head flicks between them, my mouth open. I’m not sure what to say.

“Are you sure?” Hunter asks all business now.

Landon nods. “Yes. Levi just messaged me. Ezra has been looking for her without us

knowing. I think it's your father's doing. I guess perhaps to see which of his sons are loyal to him."

Landon looks ready for action—a man I wouldn't want to come face-to-face with in a dark alley.

"Damn, he got into Ezra's head. That's going to be a problem."

I'm utterly confused. I raise my hand like a little schoolkid. "Uh...who are Levi and Ezra?"

"My younger brothers," Hunter answers, and his words are strained.

Obviously, there's some conflict. "I'm guessing they are not good brothers by the way you answered."

Hunter looks at me. "Levi is my youngest brother. He can see the trouble my father causes and doesn't want any part in it. Ezra, on the other hand, has been trying to show that he'll obey anything my father says. My father has done a number on him."

"And they now have my mother. What's the point of that?" I shift my gaze back to Landon, hoping for an answer.

"Leverage. They will release her to us only if you come." He points to me, and it feels like there's a target drawn squarely on my chest.

"Well, we have to go get her." My arms wave around with urgency. I start to walk toward the house but quickly realize they aren't following. "Um...hello? We have to go help my mother."

Hunter hangs his head, and I catch his shoulders drop and rise again. "We can't go

right away.”

I stomp back to him. “Why not? I’m ready. Well, not really, but I will be.”

Hunter is shaking his head. “No, it’s not that. It’s...” He stops, and his eyes go past me to Landon. I turn to him and catch him shaking his head.

“What’s going on?” I stomp my foot. I want answers.

Nothing.

They’ve become silent.

“So much for no more secrets. You can sleep somewhere else tonight,” I growl out.

24

I stomp toward the house.

Thankfully, Hunter doesn't follow, and neither does Landon. I don't understand what the big secret is. It's so hard for him to be open and honest with me, but if he wants me to be a part of his world, then he needs to include me. I'm done with being left out. Done with Hunter and this entire thing, whatever it is.

My boots trample up the few stairs into the house, and I yank them off, letting them fall to the floor with a thud . I head straight for my bedroom and slam the door behind me, pacing the floor.

A light knock at the door makes me pause.

“What?” I bite out.

The door opens, and May's head pops around. “Are you all right? I can't help but notice stomping feet and slamming doors. Kind of reminds me of what it's like to have kids around.” She smiles, and slowly, I simmer down.

I'm not mad at her. “I am so mad at Hunter. Apparently, his father has my mother, and they won't go and get her. His father wants me there.”

May's eyes go wide, and she covers her mouth with a hand, the distress evident. Her other wraps around her stomach. “They have Miriam?” she asks, disbelieving.

I nod.

“That’s not good, honey. They desperately want you.”

“What? The other week, you and Hunter were arguing about me going to see his father, and now you’re both against it. Why?” I fold my arms across my chest and wait.

May sighs. “Honey, come sit.” She moves to the wooden box at the end of my bed—the bed Hunter and I have been sharing for the last month. Reluctantly, I sit beside her. “Now that they have your mother, they have leverage over you and Hunter. It’s not good. It is a huge power play on Thomas’ behalf. He can manipulate the way discussions go, and he could easily kill you both when you’re there. Oh, darling, it’s not good.”

The weight of her words rests on my shoulders. A power play . I’m a pawn in a game of chess, and I need to make myself queen instead.

The game is about to change.

“I’m done with sitting around, waiting for Thomas to come find me. I’m ready to go to him and—”

“You will do no such thing,” Hunter growls out, and my head turns toward him.

I narrow my gaze on him, rising from my seat. “You do not get to tell me what to do. I’m not your prisoner. I thought I was something much more important to you. I guess I was wrong.”

His shoulders drop. “You’re not ready to meet him.” His voice is full of dread.

“What about my mother? Is he going to kill her?” My throat tightens at the mention of the word ‘kill.’

Slowly, Hunter comes toward me while May remains unmoving. No matter how much he tries to butter me up, I will not give up this fight. It’s not going to put out the fire inside me.

“I’ll go in and make sure she’s all right. They’re obviously trying to pull you away from the safety here,” Hunter says.

“Safety? Excuse me. What happened to me here again?” My finger comes to my head. “Oh, that’s right, I was shot while I was here on my own. I’m not safe. Not here. Not anywhere.”

“That was my mistake. One that will never happen again. I shouldn’t have left you on your own, and you’ll never be on your own again.” His hand comes up and rests on my shoulder, but I shift away from his touch. Right now, I don’t want it.

“You should have let me live my life away from here, away from all of this,” I mutter.

“You would probably be dead, and then I would have failed Nash.” My heart tears apart at the mention of the brother I’ll never get to see again. “He sought you out so that I could keep you safe. My father is a vile man, and I promise you that he’ll die for what he’s done to your family.” I can see the flames of determination in his eyes. He will kill his father, no doubt about that.

“Good. I hope he suffers. I need you both to leave.” I walk away from them toward the bathroom, but when I turn back, they haven’t moved. “You can still sleep somewhere else,” I remind him. As much as it hurts for me to say that, I need space.

I don't wait for his reply, stepping into the bathroom and locking the door behind me. Really, I should be the one sleeping somewhere else. I'm in his room. Oh well, he can set me straight once I'm out.

I turn on the shower and step in, fully clothed. Leaning against the cold tiles, I slip down to the floor.

This seems to be the place I fall apart.

The steaming hot water soaks through my clothes.

I don't care.

I don't care about anything anymore.

I was alone in the world for so long, and now, all of a sudden, I am swamped with . . .

Family.

Death.

Heartbreak.

They all have one thing in common.

Hunter.

The moment he came into the diner, my world was flipped upside down.

It's all been about gain for him—power—to be the king in the game of chess, and he wants me to be his queen.

Am I ready for that commitment?

Probably not. Will I let Thomas Wolfe destroy what's left of my family? Not a chance in hell. I don't stand for killing, but he's going to die by my hand by the end of all this. His blood will pay the debt he owes to me for the loss and destruction of my family.

He'll know by now that my sisters are alive, and he'll be looking for them. His vendetta, which started when I was taken away, will only end when I face him. I must push aside my fear and take my position as queen.

Thomas Wolfe won't see me coming.

25

After discovering that Hunter and Landon aren't going to help my mother, I plan to take matters into my own hands. If his father wants me, that's what he's going to get. I'm sure once I show my face in public, Thomas or one of his people will show up. Using myself as bait isn't the most ideal thing, but I want his attention, so I'm going to put myself out there and hope Thomas takes the bait.

A light knock at my door startles me from my thoughts. I throw my backpack into the closet, hiding the fact that I plan to leave. I've spent the week looking up where exactly I am and planning how to get to my mother the fastest.

I've pulled back from Hunter and hardly spoken to him. I don't want to hear his excuses. I wanted his help getting my mother back, and he told me no. I don't like that word. It's never stopped me before, and even when a deliciously sexy guy like Hunter says it, it still doesn't affect me.

May pokes her head inside. She's been oddly attentive this past week, always asking me to help her cook and care for the horses and other animals. Of course, I wouldn't say no to my grandmother. But it's as though she knows something is going on.

"Just popping in to see if you wanted to come and have a ride on one of the horses?"

"I've never ridden before. Will I be riding Snowflake?" I've been spending some time with her and getting her used to the saddle on her back—breaking her in, as they call it. The first day I put it on her, she reared up and kept going until the saddle fell off. Stubborn girl.

“Hell no, honey, she’s nowhere near ready to be ridden. One of our other horses is saddled up, ready for you.”

I know exactly what she’s doing—keeping me busy.

I shut my closet door, giving May a nervous smile, secretly hoping she can’t see through me. “Sure, sounds good. I’ll be out shortly.”

She nods and backs out the way she came. I release a puff of air. “How am I going to pull this off?” I mutter.

After changing into a pair of jeans, I make my way to the barn. As soon as I shut the door behind me, I turn and am met with Hunter stepping out of the stall. I pause, my stomach twisting, and I hate that he causes my body to react. I was going to help him, and now, when it comes to helping me, he doesn’t want to return the favor.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, chewing my bottom lip.

He’s wearing his work boots, jeans, and a black tee. He could wear a paper bag and still be utterly gorgeous. His well-chiseled jaw with a light stubble only adds to the appeal. I bite my lip much harder than I should and can taste the metallic tang on my tongue.

He steps toward me. “I’ve come to help you with riding. I’m guessing May didn’t tell you I was the one teaching you?”

“Nope, she didn’t. Yeah, thanks, but no thanks. I don’t want you helping me with anything.” I turn back toward the door, but the sound of heavy footfalls follows behind me. Before I can make it out of the barn, arms wrap around me.

“Let me go,” I growl out while struggling against Hunter’s chest.

“Will you stop acting like I’ve tried to kill you or something?”

I stop and narrow my eyes in disbelief. Did he really just say that?

His hold loosens on me, and I use it to my advantage, whipping around, pulling my arm back, and closing my fist. With everything I have, I push it forward. He doesn’t see it coming and is too late to dodge my blow. My fist connects with that beautiful face, and he cries out.

“You may not have killed me, but you’ve left my mother in the hands of those monsters... your family. That’s killing a small part of me. Do you really think I wouldn’t want to know my mother, considering she never had anything to do with me disappearing as a baby? No, that was our grandmothers’ fault. I don’t see them getting raked over the coals for what they did. No, it’s other people in my family suffering.” I swipe away the tear sliding down my cheek.

He’s red-faced, and his breaths are coming hard and fast. His hard stare is unwavering and focused on me. Normally, his intensity would spark something, but not now.

“Didn’t see that coming, did you? You can thank Landon for that.” I stab a finger at him. My hand aches, but Landon has been teaching me hand combat, so I know it is fine.

Hunter moves so quickly that I don’t get a chance to register what he’s doing. His mouth smashes to mine, his tongue pushing through my lips and invading my mouth. I want to push him away, only my body craves his touch. My hands come up to his face as my shirt is pulled over my head. Our mouths separate for a split second, and I’m left panting.

The connection of heat, desire, and Hunter claiming me is something that can’t be

ignored. I was already his. Only he doesn't know how much I want him.

He pushes me against the barn door, lifting me. My legs wrap around his waist, and he pulls back, both of us breathing heavily. He studies me. "You're so beautiful. I—" He stops, cutting off the rest of his words.

"What?" I insist. My hands cup his face.

Affection glows in his eyes.

A burning need pulses from my body to his.

"Nothing." He sighs. Then, gently, he places me on my wobbly legs, and my chest aches. Hunter turns his back to me and walks away.

A lump forms in my throat, and my heart feels as though it's just been stomped on. My cheeks flush. Then, without saying a word, I quickly escape through the door. I run even though I'm not even sure where to.

When my stomach feels like it might heave up my breakfast, I stop, dry retching. The stress of this entire situation is finally destroying me piece by piece. I drop to my knees in the damp dirt. When I lift my head, my eyes connect to Nash's headstone. I drop my head into my hands, tears filling them.

Nash's grave holds me captive. He trusted Hunter. What if Hunter is playing his own game? Setting me up in some way, I'm not sure.

"I'm sorry, Nash. I'm doing everything wrong." I hiccup.

The tears keep falling.

I push myself off the dirt and sit on the bench, composing myself and finding a new determination. “Tonight’s the night. I’m going to get revenge for you and the rest of our family. Thomas Wolfe will pay, and if Dad has anything to do with this, he’s going to pay as well. I’ll finish this.”

* * *

There’s an unnerving silence around the dinner table tonight. May keeps clearing her throat, and Hunter is playing with his food instead of eating it. The tension between us is so thick it’s like a fog. I don’t see a way for Hunter and me to resolve our issues anytime soon. He’s pushed me too far.

“How did the riding go today?” May asks.

“It didn’t happen,” I reply flatly, then shove another forkful of potato in my mouth.

May’s narrowed eyes fall on Hunter, her lips pursed. “What has gotten into you?”

My eyebrows shoot up. Wow, go Granny.

“What?” He grunts.

May rises from her seat. Her hand comes down to smack him across the head, and I laugh.

“Ow. What’s that for?” he shouts.

“For being a stupid male.”

“Wow, twice in one day...seems like you deserve it,” I say, and May turns to me, confusion in her eyes. “Oh, I hit him earlier,” I elaborate.

May laughs, lifting some of the tension around the table.

“More like she punched me,” he complains and gives me a look that says, “ Watch May grill you. ”

I simply reply, “You deserved it.”

Landon chooses the wrong moment to walk through the sliding door.

“Perhaps it should be you I’m mad at for teaching her.”

Landon stops, and all eyes are on him. May and I are smiling, and Hunter looks pissed. That little vein in his neck is protruding, making me want to laugh more.

“I’m sorry, what?” His deep voice is filled with confusion.

Hunter stands. “You teaching Aelina to hit. Or, should I say, punch?”

Landon’s eyebrows pull together, then raise with realization. A wry grin pulls across his face as he turns to me. “Did you hit him?”

I nod proudly.

“Impressive.” He grins.

“Did you need something?” Hunter asks, clearly pissed.

Cleaning his throat, Landon says, “You were right. Target is going to move.”

Hunter curses under his breath, his hand rubbing his face. There’s silence for a moment before he follows up with, “Watch it and report back.”

Landon nods, then walks to the kitchen and grabs the empty plate on the counter. My focus returns to Hunter.

“What’s going on?” May asks the question I’d been about to.

Hunter sits back down. “We’re not sure yet. We’re keeping an eye on things. Then we’ll decide about moving forward with the meeting.”

I sit a little higher in my seat. “You mean meeting your father?”

“Yes,” he bites out.

“When is that going to happen?” I ask.

His head turns to me, and his eyes burn into my soul. “When the time is right.”

26

As I open my eyes, the house is silent. This is the opportunity I've been waiting for.

Leaping out of bed, I don't turn on my light—I only use the flashlight on my phone.

I silently go to the closet and grab my prepacked backpack. When I retired to my room earlier, I made the excuse that I was tired. Instead, I'd packed my bag to clear out of here tonight. I'm going to get my mother and hopefully not get killed while trying to get to her.

I've left the patio door slightly ajar, so after slipping on my runners, I take my phone and order an Uber. It tells me that it will be about twenty minutes before it's supposed to arrive. Slipping on my backpack, I silently open the door.

Hooking one leg over the patio railing, I bring my entire body over, then make a jump. Landing on the dirt, my shoes crunch, and I cringe. It's like I'm walking on a bag of potato chips in a silent church.

It's a cool night tonight, and glancing at my phone, it reads two a.m.

Without thinking, I run toward the driveway, not looking back. It usually takes about five minutes to drive this driveway, so I should make it to the gate before the Uber arrives. My breaths are even, and it's times like this that I'm thankful for being an active person.

Fifteen minutes later, I make it to the gate. Turning back, I don't see anyone

following and puff out a huff of air that I'd held onto.

Headlights come over the little ridge, and I step back into the shadows, hoping it's not someone who might be keeping an eye on me or something. When I see the indicator come on for the driveway, I step out and wave to them.

They stop themselves from going down the driveway.

Pulling the door open, I lean down. "Hey."

"Are you Aelina?"

"Yes."

"Hop in." The driver seems focused on his job as he pushes some buttons on his phone. "So you're heading into the city? You've put in a bakery that I know doesn't open for another few hours." He eyes me in his rearview mirror.

"Uh...yeah. I'm meeting my friend there. She's showing me the nightlife of New York."

He shrugs, seeming to accept my lame response. I only knew of the bakery because it had been mentioned to me once. I've never been to New York, so I'm stepping into a place I know nothing about.

Here's hoping Thomas finds me.

I swallow my anxiousness.

This is something I need to do.

You can do this.

Forty-five minutes later, we're in the big city. I can't get over how busy it is at this time of morning. I guess I shouldn't be surprised, considering it's a Friday night. Finally, the silent driver pulls up at the bakery I'd seen on my Google search.

"Where's your friend?" he asks.

"Oh, she said she's running five minutes late." I pretend to read a message on my phone.

"Do you want me to wait with you?"

My heart's racing. "No, it's fine, thank you. She'll be here any minute." I climb out of the car, giving him my thanks. He lingers, and I pretend to get a call, hoping he leaves. After several minutes, he does just that.

Thank goodness.

I glance down the street. One way leads me toward a dark alley and the other toward the busy nightlife. Being around people right now looks like the better option, so I make my way toward the busy streets. Across the street, there's a twenty-four-hour shop, and my stomach growls.

All right, I'll get some food.

I step inside, and only a handful of people are in the store. I make my way up and down some aisles, grabbing a prepackaged sandwich, fruit, and sweets. I stop dead in my tracks when I get to the toiletry aisle. Mulling over numbers and dates in my head. When did I have my last period?

“Damn.” I hiss, and my heart slaps against my chest.

I go straight for the pregnancy tests, glancing up and down the aisle to make sure no one sees me grab it and shove it deep in my basket.

This can’t be happening.

I can’t be.

What am I going to do?

Walking to the cashier, I place my things on the counter. My hands shake as I grip the test and practically throw it.

“Good evening, young lady,” the elderly man serving me greets.

My smile wavers. “Hey,” I answer breathlessly. “Uh...do you have a restroom I could use?”

When he sees my test, his facial expression doesn’t change. I can only imagine that he’s judging me. All those insults are probably running through his mind.

What am I going to do if it’s positive?

I’ll have to tell Hunter.

My stomach twists at the thought.

“There’s one at the back of the store.”

I nod, pay for my stuff, then head straight for the restroom. Why wasn’t I more

careful? I push the door open and lock it, my fingers still shaking. I release the heavy breath that was stuck in my lungs as I stare at the toilet bowl like it's going to jump out and bite me. Placing my bag on the floor near the door, I dig out the pregnancy test box and rip it open.

I'm sick to my stomach as I follow the directions. My chest tightens, waiting for either the second little line to show or not to show. Unable to sit still, I place it on the back of the toilet, then clean myself up and wash my hands.

Tears fill my eyes as I approach the test, my body trembling with nerves. Rubbing my hands together, I try to calm my already over-the-top anxiousness.

I stare down at the test.

Positive.

I'm pregnant...

... with Hunter's baby.

A quiver rolls over my stomach, and I dry retch into the toilet bowl. Perhaps I should go back to May's and tell her. How am I going to tell Hunter?

I walk to the sink on shaky legs and wash my hands, splashing my face. I can't believe I'm pregnant. A baby hasn't been something on my mind, and now I'm frightened to bring it into this world. My arms wrap around my stomach, unable to stop another dry retch into the sink.

I could put the baby up for adoption, and no one would need to know. Oh goodness, what if it's twins? My stomach fills with piles of dread that keep landing on top of each other.

I need to save my mother. That's what is pressing right now.

Splashing my face with water again, I take a slow cleansing breath, then dry off with a paper towel. "Pull yourself together, Aelina. We'll get through this. Everything will work out how it's supposed to."

When I step back into the shop, everything feels different. Even my body feels different. It has a little person growing inside it. I need to protect him or her at all costs. This is my baby. My blood. It won't get taken away from me. It won't have the life I've had.

Things are the same on the street—people walk past me as though they don't have a care in the world. It's me who is not the same.

A loud shot rings through the night. I scream, dropping my body low to the ground as do others around me. Another shot soon follows. Something hits the brick wall near me, and I scream again.

Suddenly, there's a man by my side. I look up and nearly die. "Landon?"

He looks at me with sadness in his eyes, but there's also anger. At that second, I know. He knew I was planning to leave and has been watching me ever since.

Which means ...

"Does Hunter know?"

He nods.

Another shot, and I scream again.

Landon takes my arm and pulls me into the back seat of a nearby black SUV—Hunter’s car. I half expect Hunter to be there waiting for me, ready to chew me out.

Landon leaps into the car and tears out and down the street. “Keep your head down until I tell you it’s safe,” he grumbles.

After a short moment of lots of turning and swerving away from that place, he says, “You can sit up now.” And when I do, I know where we are heading—back to May’s. Only this time, there’s a plus one that only I know about.

“What was the outcome?” Landon asks once we are clear of the city.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“The test. I went in after you to see if you’d left it there.”

Wow, he is really good at being stealthy. I should take a few of those lessons with him.

I’m silent for a moment, then look up into the rearview mirror. “It was positive.”

I watch as his eyes shut for a brief second, then meet mine again. “It’ll be okay. We’ll tell Hunter, and he’ll take care of it.”

Take care of it? “Excuse me? I’m not getting rid of this baby.” My voice rises with each word, my hand falling to my stomach.

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant.” He sighs. “I’m terrible at this soft stuff. Give me running from bullets any day. Soft, mushy, lovey-dovey crap isn’t for me.” The words come out in a rush.

This is the most uncomfortable I've seen him. And he's right. I have never seen him with gentle eyes, the kind he's looking at me with right now.

I can't help but laugh, and Landon finally cracks a decent smile. I probably shouldn't be laughing, considering I've just been shot at three times, but it's somehow therapeutic.

"Congratulations," he finally offers.

"Thanks. How do you think Hunter is going to take this?" I chew my lip, waiting for his response.

"Any news on you makes him the happiest."

"Landon, I don't want to tell him right now."

Landon's brows pull together, apparently not happy about that. "He needs to know."

He's right. Hunter does need to know, but not right now. Anything can happen, and leaving my mother with the likes of Hunter's father isn't something I can chance. As soon as I tell him, he will ensure I'm on lockdown, which does me no favors.

"No, he doesn't. Not until I get my mother back safely with us. He'll bench me if he finds out I'm pregnant. I'm key to getting my mother back. You know this. I need to be in this. Please don't tell him. Not yet."

Landon runs a hand through his hair. "I can't say I'm happy about this, but you're right on all accounts. I'll look out for you, Aelina." There's promise in his words. And from everything he's shown me, he's loyal and someone I can fully trust.

Now, how am I going to hide this from Hunter and May?

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“What were you thinking?” Hunter yells, trampling a path in front of me while I sit on the couch.

My chin tremors and the tears will fall any second. I keep my mouth closed, not willing myself to speak in case I let the secret slip.

“I don’t understand, Aelina. You could have been killed. Those bullets were meant for you.” He stabs a finger in my direction, his face red.

May comes and sits down beside me. “Hunter, you need to calm down. Landon was there the whole time. He wouldn’t have allowed harm to come to her.” Her voice is calming in a motherly way. I should say grandmotherly way.

She takes my hand, giving it a gentle rub, but it’s hard to relax.

Hunter’s fist curls and uncurls three times before he takes a deep breath. “May, she did something that could have gotten her killed and destroyed everything we’ve been working toward.”

I look between them. “Excuse me? The reason I did what I did was because you weren’t doing anything about my mother, and you still aren’t telling me everything like you promised. So how can I trust you?” I stand and turn my back to him, grabbing my backpack and heading for my bedroom.

Shutting the door behind me, I go straight for the bathroom. Grabbing the pregnancy

test from my bag, I put the toilet lid down and sit, staring at the stick. My world is about to change in so many ways—becoming a part of the underworld, helping Hunter take things over, and pushing out those who stand with his father. It's going to be a new empire. This baby is going to have a different upbringing.

I'm having a baby .

I know nothing about babies or how even to change a diaper. My only hope is Hunter has had some experience, given that he has younger brothers. I'm sure May will step in and help.

A sharp knock at the bathroom door startles me, causing the stick to fall from my hands.

“What?” I yell.

“Can I come in?” Hunter has come crawling with his tail between his legs.

I reach down, snatching up the stick. Crap, where am I going to put it? I yank open the bottom drawer of the vanity cupboard and throw it in, quietly closing it. Then I wipe my clammy hands over my top and unlock the door.

Hunter stands there, his head hanging low, but I don't move. Holding my breath, I wait for more anger to be thrown my way.

Nothing happens. Seconds pass, and then, at lightning speed, he has me wrapped in his arms, and the dam breaks. My tears fall onto his shirt as I clutch the fabric, the sobs tearing through my chest. Hunter's arms tighten around me, his hands rubbing up and down my back.

“I've got you,” he whispers into my hair, his face buried in my neck.

My tears finally subside, yet he holds onto me for dear life, and I need it like I need air to breathe.

“Hunter, I’m sorry,” I manage without hiccupping.

“Little Red...” He pauses. “I should have told you before, but we are going to get your mother back. I was waiting until you were ready. I guess, given that you’re willing to put yourself in danger for her, I better get the ball moving. The sooner we take over, the sooner all this darkness and death will slowly disappear.”

“We’re going to get her back?” I ask, unable to hide my excitement.

“Yes, and another thing...kiss me, woman. I’ve missed your lips.”

He doesn’t have to ask twice. My lips connect with his, and my insides melt. I want more of him—a ravaging of clothes being taken off, deep kissing, and lots of touching.

With each caress, all the uncertainty surrounding my mother and our baby washes away. I know that he’ll do everything he can to protect me and what remains of my family.

* * *

Warmth presses against my back.

Hunter.

A smile touches my lips.

His arm is wrapped around my naked body. His hand rests on my stomach, and

butterflies take flight.

If only he knew.

“Your brain is loud.” Hunter’s gravelly mumble causes my eyes to spring open.

I twist my body to face him.

“How do you know?” I kiss his lips, and he responds with a deeper, more passionate kiss.

It’s as if his lips make me love-drunk. When he stops kissing me, my lips tingle. Licking them, I savor his taste.

He sighs, pulling me tighter against his bare chest. “I just know you. I can read your mind.”

If only you could actually read my mind . “Okay then. Tell me,” I challenge.

His eyes finally open. “You’re thinking I’m hot and that we should take this to the shower.”

I laugh as he kicks back the covers and lifts me, carrying me to the bathroom.

* * *

Later that morning, I’m sitting out at Nash’s grave. “Well, Nash, I’m pregnant.” It seems so surreal to actually say that. “You would be an uncle.”

A lump forms in my throat.

Someone clears their throat behind me. Spinning around, I see Landon standing there wearing his usual black suit and white button-up shirt. “Sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to check in and see if you were okay?”

Hard shell, soft interior fully describes this man before me.

“I’m okay, thanks. Thanks for helping me last night.” I tap the empty spot beside me on the bench, and he joins me.

“It’s my job to protect you...” He pauses, and I catch him rubbing his hands together.

Is he nervous?

“Are you okay?” I eye him skeptically.

“No, I’m not. I don’t like keeping secrets from Hunter. He’s my boss.”

And there it is.

He’s faithful to Hunter.

“I will tell him after we get my mother back. Once he knows, he will probably flip his lid, lock me up, and never let me leave here again. Good thing this place keeps me busy, or I’d be climbing the walls with boredom.” I laugh.

He does nothing—simply stares at the headstones before me.

“Tell me what’s on your mind, Landon. It’s not just my secret.”

“No, it’s not,” He pauses, then continues, “Levi told me that Ezra is the one who put the hit out on you. Hunter knows this, only he felt that you didn’t need to know. I’m

through with keeping secrets from you. You deserve to know. Please don't let on that I told you."

I swallow. "His brother? Could his family be more messed up?" I growl, smacking my hands on my knees.

"There's a lot of history. But...there's something else about last night. Your father was there, and he was shooting at the person trying to hit you."

My head jerks back, and I look at him. "What?"

"By the looks of things last night, I'd say your father was trying to protect you."

"Why would he? When he rang me that time, I thought he was out to kill me."

Landon shakes his head. "No, I've been keeping an eye on him. I know he's followed you here and into the city."

"That doesn't make sense. Where is he staying? Isn't Hunter's father after him?"

He nods. "Yes, he's currently staying on this property. It's a pretty big piece of land. He built a shack years ago in the forest way out." He points past the tree line.

"My father has been here, and you haven't told me?" My voice rises.

Landon rubs his face. "I know. Hunter knows he's been there. I've been watching to make sure he keeps his distance."

"Can I see him?"

"No," a firm voice shouts from behind us. We both stand and face Hunter, who

appears pissed off. “What do you think you’re doing?” His question is directed at Landon.

“Telling her what you wouldn’t. She has a right to know.” His voice is as hard as Hunter’s.

So this is what it’s like when two powerful men have it out.

“I would have told her.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” I interject, and they stop, turning toward me. “You have done nothing but keep secrets from me. I told you I didn’t want that anymore, and you still couldn’t be open. I’m glad Landon came to me because at least now I know my father may not be the dangerous man he’s been painted to be.” Hunter opens his mouth to respond, but I hold my hand up. “I don’t want lies or secrets anymore. Don’t talk to me unless you can promise me that.”

“Fine.” He’s clearly unhappy about this. “But you have to promise me that you won’t go running away again.”

“Fine,” I say, echoing his tone.

“Glad we could clear that up.” He turns to Landon. “Something is going on in the city. It seems some feathers have been ruffled since last night’s escapades.” He raises his eyebrows at me.

“Oh well, maybe they needed to get ruffled.” I shrug. “This entire thing is going too slowly now, and I want to deal with it head-on. Arrange the meet-and-greet with your father, and let’s get my mother back.”

Hunter folds his arms, and a smug smile stretches across his face. “You do realize

that sometimes things aren't that simple? My father is going to have a plan ready to go, so we have to have something up our sleeve."

It appears I might have the smoking gun. I give Landon a side glance. He returns it, only he shakes his head. Now I'm confused.

"What if we do the meet-and-greet and make it a formal event? Kind of like an engagement party?" Landon suggests.

"Engagement party?" I ask curiously.

"That's not a bad idea, Landon."

"Um...excuse me. What engagement? Who's getting engaged?"

"Us," Hunter answers.

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“Y ou know you don’t have to do this,” May says as she zips up the red, slim-fitting, satin dress Hunter bought for this specific occasion.

Meeting his father.

And apparently, we have to go as an engaged couple. If we’re officially together, then it will be harder for him to harm me. The people will have something to say, making it more difficult for him to get away with my murder.

May has been trying to talk me out of it for the past two days. It’s something I need to do. This needs to be sorted. “I know, but it has to happen. The only way for all of this to go away is to come clean and make everything right. I want to get my mom to safety, and if this is how we’re going to do it, I trust that Hunter and Landon will protect me.”

The more I think about it, the more I need to tell May about the baby. She will know what I should do and how I tell Hunter.

Thankfully, there’s currently no morning sickness, but if that starts, she will be concerned. I don’t want her to worry more than she already does.

“May...I...” I pause, the words stuck in my throat.

My door slams open.

“Something is going on.” Landon rushes in, a gun in his hand, and goes straight for my patio door. My stomach tightens, and a cold chill runs down my spine. His words strike fear through every bone in my body.

“What is it?” May asks, her face pale.

“We picked up someone on our security cameras. We put them up after what happened with Miles.”

“Couldn’t you see their face?” I rush over to where he stands.

His eyes dart around the surrounding areas, and he shakes his head. “Their head was down, and they kept to the shadows. Since the sun is setting, it is hard to make things out on the cameras.”

“Where’s Hunter?” Landon grabs my arm and swiftly yet gently pulls me behind him.

“He’s gone to check it out.”

Ignoring Landon, I snatch my arm from his grip and rush over to May. “It’s all right. Everything will be fine.”

“This is all too much,” she says breathlessly, and I take her in my arms and hug her.

“It will all work out. You have nothing to worry about,” I whisper in her ear.

Landon’s phone rings, and he answers it swiftly. “Okay, not a problem,” is all he says. His gun lowers, and he tucks it away in the back of his pants.

“Well, who is it?” I release May and face Landon.

Landon looks at me. “Come with me.”

“Who is out there?” I ask again.

He strides to the door, pausing with his hand on the handle. “It’s your father.”

My eyes bulge. “Um...isn’t he trying to take me to Hunter’s father?”

Landon shakes his head.

I rub my head. A small pounding has started to throb. All the back and forth is too much.

“Just come.”

“I will in a minute. Let me talk to May for a second.” He eyes me skeptically. “Don’t worry. I’ll be out there in five minutes.”

I need to tell May about the pregnancy. I need someone else to know. No, I need May to know. I’m going to need her in the days to come.

Landon nods, exiting the room.

“Are you okay about seeing my dad?” I ask.

May appears dazed, tears in her eyes. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him.” Her voice shakes.

“Do you want to see him?” My hands hold her shoulders.

The usual strength she portrays has evaporated. This is fragile May, not the woman

I've become accustomed to being around.

"Yes, of course I want to. He's my son. Whatever has happened in the past is in the past. I only hope he can forgive me for what I've done to his family." Her head falls.

"May, look at me..." I wait for her eyes to meet mine. "What I'm about to tell you doesn't leave this room. Do you understand?"

She blinks.

"Do you understand?" I push.

"Yes, okay. What's wrong? Are you all right?" There's the May I know.

I release her arms, and my hand comes up and runs through my long, brown locks. I take a deep breath and release it slowly. "I'm...I'm pregnant."

Her mouth falls open. "What?" she practically screams.

"Shh...don't yell, or the boys will come rushing in here, and I don't want them to know. Well, Landon already knows, but Hunter doesn't." I blurt it all out so fast that it's a wonder it makes any sense.

May holds her hand up, stopping me. "Hunter is the father, and he doesn't know?" There's no missing the concern in her question.

"That's right. I can't tell him, or he won't let me be a part of all this and finally get everything sorted out. Hopefully, when I do tell him, it will be the start of a peaceful time between the families."

May takes my hands. "I'm so happy," she whispers before pulling me in for a hug.

“Please don’t tell him, May.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” She grips my body tighter, then releases me. “How far along?”

I shrug. “I think it’s very early on. Maybe five weeks? I’ll get a checkup once things settle down and I’m a little further along.”

“Okay. Oh my goodness. I’m going to be a great granny. I don’t feel old enough for that.” She giggles to herself.

“All right, let’s go get this sorted,” I say and turn toward the door. It’s as though a weight has lifted off my shoulders.

Telling May was the right thing to do.

* * *

I feel sick.

There’s a turbulent storm brewing within me, and unease sits in the pit of my stomach. My father is here. I don’t know what to expect.

Is he going to be vile to me like he was when he rang me? Is he going to try to kill me?

The sliding door opens, and I sit at the dining table, my hands twisting together. The sun has completely set now, and darkness surrounds the house, but lights fill the home.

May’s hand rests over mine as she sits on the chair beside me. I glance over at her,

and she gives me a warm, calming smile. It still doesn't settle my nerves.

Hunter walks in, followed by the man who stood out in front of my apartment all those months ago, and Landon brings up the rear. He's not holding his gun, so there must not be a threat.

May stands and races over to her son. "Oh, Arthur," she cries out, wrapping her arms around a man who has seen better days and is in need of a good scrub in the shower.

His clothes are ripped in places, and a coat hangs over his frail-looking body. I didn't think he might be without running water and clothes in the cabin that Landon told me about.

I don't move, watching curiously as May and the man she called Arthur hug again. Hunter has made his way to me and stands behind my chair. His presence brings comfort, but a tumble of nerves still rolls about in my gut.

"Hello, Mother," he says, his voice deep and not threatening like it was over the phone.

"Why are you here?" Hunter doesn't beat around the bush. There's a harshness to his tone, and it sends a chill down my spine.

My eyes are glued to Arthur. His focus moves from May to where I sit and Hunter stands. I have a sudden urge to run or maybe shout. My fingers tap at the table, but Hunter's hand settles on my shoulder, and I stop.

"I've come to help get my wife." He rubs his hand up his arm, appearing nervous.

"We don't need your help," I lash out. Those familiar eyes burn into mine, and I stand so I don't appear scared, even though I'm fighting a battle of wits within me.

“How dare you come here after threatening me?”

Arthur stands taller. “I did that because I needed you to go with Hunter. I wanted you scared enough that you would go and stay with him.”

“So you’d rather me think you were the bad guy...like you wanted me dead?” I fold my arms across my chest.

“Yes. Because I knew Hunter had come to you. There was word on the street that Thomas Wolfe knew about you, and it was only a matter of time before they found you and took you, possibly punished you because of what happened to you and your sisters.” His voice cracks at the mention of what could possibly happen to my sisters and me.

He’s lost so much over the years—his wife, sons, and three daughters. I want so badly to be angry at him. “Was it you who called my workplace and also made a scene?” I raise my eyebrows.

“Yes,” he responds.

“So, how do you think you can help us get Mom back?” I chew my bottom lip, waiting for his response.

“I assumed you had a plan, and I want in on it.” He tugs on his coat and turns to Hunter. “You do have a plan, don’t you?”

“We do,” he clips.

“Can I help? I really want to get my wife back.” Arthur clears his throat.

“You could come and be backup if we need you. If my father spots you, it could turn

everything in the wrong direction,” Hunter cautions, rubbing a hand through his hair and squeezing the back of his neck. It’s clear the stress of this is weighing on him.

“Okay. I’ll do anything,” my father eagerly agrees.

Hunter nods. “Landon will fill you in on what’s going on.” Hunter gestures to Landon, who steps forward.

“Thank you.” Arthur goes to leave, then stops, turning to face me. “I am sorry for scaring you. You have grown into a beautiful young woman. I hope you have it in your heart to forgive me.”

I open and close my mouth twice. Nothing wants to come out. Arthur doesn’t wait for a response before he turns and follows Landon outside.

When the house is finally clear, I drop back into the chair. A breath I didn’t realize I was holding pushes between my lips. “This is too much,” I whisper to myself. I have no idea how I’m going to get through this.

With each new revelation, a small piece of my old self chips away. I’m tougher than this, or so I thought.

I want to change things, but at what cost?

I want Hunter to take charge, but is my heart worth the risk?

Hunter crouches beside me. “Are you all right?”

I glance up. This man is a force to be reckoned with. He’s gentle yet demanding. Powerful, yet will submit to me. Would he break if something happened to me?

“I’ll be okay. Let’s go get my mother back and put this matter behind us.” I stand on wobbly legs and steady myself with the table. May rushes over to me, and Hunter takes my arm.

“You’re clearly not okay. I can reschedule this,” Hunter says, his face coming into my view.

I rise higher and push aside all my fears and doubts. This needs to happen. I want it over with. “Let’s get this done,” I press.

“Okay, then there’s one final thing we need to do to sell that this...” he gestures between us, “... is a real thing.”

“Isn’t it a real thing already?” I ask, hurt by his reference to our relationship.

We haven’t really discussed our relationship. I guess I shouldn’t have assumed that we were an actual couple.

Hunter stares at me. It’s as if he’s trying to read my mind. “I...uh...”

“It’s fine. This doesn’t have to be anything,” I quickly say, needing to deflect from my feelings.

Silence fills the room.

“I think I’ll leave you two to talk,” May interjects, heading down the hallway.

I wish I could run away as easily.

“So you want to have the talk?”

“No.” My short response causes him to jerk back slightly.

“Little Red, we were always going to be more. I love you, Little Red.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a little red velvet box.

My heart pounds against my chest, and I suck in a sharp breath. I'm sure Hunter can hear it. "Are you serious, or is this just a ploy for your family?"

"I'm being serious, Little Red. I want to marry you."

Did Landon talk to him?

He pulls open the red box and drops to one knee. My hands fly to my mouth when the sparkly jewel shines back at me—a light pink princess-cut stone with a golden band. It's perfection and very much me.

"Is that a pink diamond?"

His grin is infectious, and I can't help but smile back. "Of course. Only the best for you."

"When did you have a chance to get this?" He's been here most of the time.

"I've had it chosen from the moment I brought you back here. I've wanted you since I laid eyes on you in the photo Nash gave me."

"Really?" I ask breathlessly.

"Really." He laughs. "Are you going to give me an answer or keep me on my knee a little longer?"

I laugh. This is really happening. I'm not dreaming.

Without hesitation, I answer, "Yes, I'll marry you."

Hunter takes the ring from the box and slides it onto my slender finger. It fits perfectly. I lean down, pressing my mouth to his. The fire between us ignites, and Hunter stands, backing me toward the wall. Our mouths claim each other, and I revel in the taste and savor this moment. I want him to take me back to my room and claim my body. I yearn for his touch in all the right places.

He pulls back, our breaths heavy. "We can celebrate once we deal with my family." He presses his lips to mine once more before stepping back.

"Okay, and when we get back, I've got something to tell you."

His eyebrows pull down. "What?"

"You'll just have to wait and see." I shrug nonchalantly and walk away to finish getting ready.

When I get in my room, I squeal quietly.

"What's going on?" May comes out of the bathroom.

I jump. "What the hell? I didn't know you were in here."

"I knew we'd need to finish getting you ready." Her gaze drops to my left hand, and a brilliant, wide smile spreads across her face. "Oh, he asked you." She swoons and rushes over to inspect the ring.

It's such a weird thing to think I'm engaged. I'm getting married to a mob boss or

future one.

“May, is this the right thing for me to do, given my situation?” I place my hand on my stomach.

“Aelina, you will be so well protected, and once Hunter ruffles the feathers of the underworld, everything is going to change for the better. I’ve been waiting for this since my husband passed the reins down to Arthur. Arthur only saw power. He never looked at things the way Hunter does. Hunter has a vision to help people and change the way the underworld takes care of business. Just wait and see. The more you are around Hunter to witness it for yourself, the more you’ll see that this is the best thing for you and baby.” Her words slowly sink in.

All right, I can do this. I have to do this.

“Let’s finish this then,” I say.

* * *

Hunter, Landon, and I drive in Hunter’s black SUV. My father follows behind in May’s truck. There’s nothing but static in the car. The silence is deafening, and it only causes the tension to build on what’s to come.

An engagement should be a happy time. Only everything is hinging on Hunter’s father, how he takes this news, and whether it’s enough to get my mother back.

“What’s going to happen once we get there? Neither of you have filled me in,” I question, the unknown wreaking havoc on my nerves.

Hunter sighs. “Things will be tense. My father will be suspicious even though this was the way things should have been all along. But he didn’t find you first, and that

will be a problem. His ego won't be able to handle it, and he'll see us as a threat now that we're engaged. This is something he never would have expected. Stick close to me and Landon, and if things go bad, we'll get you out, and your father will help us if we need it."

"What if it all goes wrong?" I feel sick even asking that question. There's every possibility this will turn bad, and I could die.

I lift my eyes to the rearview mirror. Landon's stare meets mine. He gives me a slight nod. I know he's got me, and I'm one hundred percent sure Hunter has me as well. I also know that if he knew about the pregnancy, he'd turn the car around and take me back to May's, locking me up away from the evils of the world.

"It won't," Hunter says as we pull to a stop outside a red-brick, two-story home. White trims the windows, and there are stunning gardens with various flowers blooming. Huge spotlights shine on the building as if it's bathed in the sun's light.

"It's a security precaution," Hunter murmurs as though he reads my mind.

"Will they see my father?" I wonder where or how he's going to get anywhere near this place.

"I've given him a way in that will allow him to miss the greeting party."

"Okay." I nod. A chilling sensation prickles at the back of my neck and down my spine. This is it. I'm meeting Hunter's family—the family who desperately wants to kill me.

There are two big, muscly men dressed in black, wearing what I assume are bulletproof vests and holding automatic rifles. I back up against the opposite door. Hunter has already hopped out and is now waiting at my door. Peering inside, he

notices I'm missing from my seat, then gets back in the car.

"I can't do this," I breathe out, and the tightness in my chest constricts with each word.

Hunter's face softens. His hand reaches over and takes mine, which is clenched into a fist. "You can do this. I'll be by your side the entire time, as will Landon." My stomach churns, and all I can think about is something happening to my baby. It has become my number one priority in the sudden face of possible danger.

"There's something I need to tell you," I start, but he holds up his hand.

"Let's get this done, then you can tell me."

"No, I need you to know," I press.

His hand squeezes mine. "Okay. What is it?"

"I...I'm..." The words get stuck in my throat.

"We have to go. The family doesn't like waiting. You can talk to me after."

But after might be too late.

I grit my teeth. "Do not rush me. This is all new. I'm sure they can wait an extra few minutes."

He sighs, but it's not of frustration or irritation. It's of understanding. He's continually chipping away pieces of my shell, and it's only a matter of time before I fall apart. Tonight could be that final piece.

“Like I said, you can tell me after. There’s no rush at all, really. Everything is going to be fine,” he reassures, and I don’t know how he can be so calm and collected.

We both know that there’s a possibility this could go every side of wrong, yet he and Landon have a stone exterior. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and draw on some of their strength.

Hunter steps out of the car, and after a second, I suck in another breath, filling my lungs, then slide across the seat and place my cream-colored satin high heels on the pavement with a click. Hunter takes my hand.

Once I’m clear of it, Landon shuts the door and is on my opposite side. The muscled men pull their guns up at us. My feet become concrete, and I stop. My eyes are drawn to the barrel of a gun now pointed at Hunter.

“Hand over your weapons?” the one on the left growls out.

Hunter releases my hand, and I immediately want it back. I need it. “That’s not going to happen. I don’t see any of you relinquishing yours.”

His calmness in the face of a gun scares me. My body is trembling. If I were to hold my hands out, I wouldn’t be able to control the shaking.

A look passes between them. “Fine.”

They drop their weapons and move aside. The massive white door in front of us opens. “Hunter.” A younger version of Hunter stares back at him.

“Levi.” Hunter smiles, and it appears genuine.

Stepping in, he embraces his brother. A quiet exchange passes between them, and

Landon's body moves closer to mine.

"Everyone is waiting," Levi informs us.

His face doesn't have the worry lines that mar Hunter's face regularly. He's dressed in black suit pants and a black button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He has the same dark hair and perfectly chiseled face as Hunter. That jawline. His eyes, though, are gray and stormy. I'd be drawn to him if Hunter hadn't already captured my heart.

Levi steps in front of me. "I hear congratulations are in order." He smiles. "About time this guy got tied down, and let me just say, he's batting above his weight."

Levi's eyes shine as they glide up and down my body. My neck heats. The red satin spaghetti-strap dress is nothing I would ever have picked for myself, but Hunter wanted me to stand out.

Hunter reaches out and playfully punches his brother in the arm.

"Back up there, brother," he whispers.

I hold out my hand. "I'm Aelina."

Levi eyes my hand. Instead of taking it, he scoops me up in his arms, laughing.

"I'm Levi," he says, unwrapping his arms and taking a small step back.

"At least you know how to have fun," I say, shoving Hunter in the chest, and he rolls his eyes.

"That's me. The clown of the family. The one who isn't always serious." He winks.

“I think we’ll get along just fine.” I adjust my dress and run my hands down it, smoothing it out after Levi’s bear hug.

“Always playing games, Levi.”

The mood changes swiftly.

All three men stand with me, their bodies rigid, and their demeanors change. Levi’s smile disappears, and he turns around, standing fully in front of me.

“Ezra,” Hunter greets.

The unpleasant tone in Hunter's voice brings the uneasiness back to my stomach. I take a step sideways to see Ezra. Blond hair and blue eyes greet me. Wow, the complete opposite of Levi and Hunter.

He is nothing like the other brothers. In fact, it's highly possible that Hunter and Levi's father isn't Ezra's dad. It's obvious the two brothers favor one parent. Is that why Thomas rides him so hard and he does anything asked of him? He's seeking the man's good graces even though he's not his father? Either he is a spitting image of their mother, or he's not a Wolfe.

"Father is waiting to meet his future daughter-in-law." It's as though he has a foul taste in his mouth when he refers to me.

"My name is Aelina," I correct him, refusing to let my fear show.

I won't let him intimidate me. Even if I want to run a mile from this place, this whole underworld thing is going to be my life soon. I have to stand up and show a brave face.

Ezra rolls his eyes. "Pfft." Hunter straightens and goes to step toward him, but I grab his arm, and Ezra laughs. "Already under the thumb, I see."

"Don't start with me," Hunter threatens. "You'll never be able to finish it."

Ezra's eyes narrow. Pulling his light blue suit coat to the side, he flashes a handgun,

and I tighten my grip on Hunter's arm.

"Such a big man with a gun. You'd be worthless without it," Hunter says.

Landon clears his throat, and Levi takes that as his moment. "Let's get going, everyone, before the party moves out into the walkway." He rubs his hands together, giving Hunter a sideways glance and shaking his head.

Unspoken words between them are the loudest and clearest to understand, even as an outsider.

Hunter scoops up my right hand. Levi is in front of me, a human shield, and Landon is on the left.

This is it.

This is where my fate will be decided.

I'm sure Hunter thinks all will go smoothly tonight despite the less-than-welcoming greeting thus far. But the heaviness in my stomach tells me otherwise. I have to remind myself that he knows his family and what they are capable of.

We walk down a crisp white-walled hall, where frames hang along the walls. I try catching glimpses of the faces in the photos, but we're moving too fast for my focus to stay on one image.

Stopping in front of a set of double dark wood doors, Ezra takes hold of both handles, pushing them open.

Voices inside fall silent.

My heart races.

I tighten my grip on Hunter's hand.

I step into the room, and my breath hitches—polished wooden floors and pure white walls. A massive crystal chandelier hangs in the middle of the ceiling. It's round, with four levels of different-sized clear crystals. It's stunning.

Large pillars are placed around the room with vases of white and red roses on top of them. Each bouquet is perfectly round. I've never seen anything like this. It's something one would see in a high-class wedding, movie, or on some rich person's social media account.

I take a moment and evaluate the unfamiliar faces in the room. There are about thirty people. Everyone is dressed as though they're attending a red carpet gala. I catch the shine of one lady's necklace, and I swear if that's a real diamond, I'm going to die. Then I take in what all the women have on, and it's a sea of sparkles and jewels.

A puff of air rushes through my red-painted lips. I can now see why Hunter bought me this dress. Nothing I own would be good enough for this group of people. He wants me to fit into his world, to be a part of it, and I will. I have to for the future of our baby.

“Well, well, well...look who finally decided to grace us with their presence.”

My head turns toward the voice. In the corner of the room, an elderly man with salt and pepper hair steps forward. I watch in awe as people move aside, allowing him to walk through them.

I try to swallow the lump which has formed in my throat. Why the hell does it have to stay there?

“Hello, Father.” Hunter nods toward the older man. Thomas Wolfe.

He stands a few feet in front of us. His black-as-night eyes flicker between Hunter and me. Although I’m pretty sure he can’t see me clearly since Levi still stands in front of me.

“Move aside, Levi,” Thomas grumbles.

Hunter’s thumb glides over my knuckles, offering me support. I take in a large breath and slowly release it. My body heats, and I feel a flush work its way up my neck.

Levi steps to the side, joining Landon. He’s close to me, closer than even Hunter, and it’s an added layer of comfort I need.

Thomas steps forward. He’s a short man, much shorter than Hunter. In his prime, I have no doubt he would have been a very good-looking man. His jaw is much like that of his sons, Levi and Hunter, again making me wonder about Ezra.

Does he look like their mom, or is he, in fact, not a Wolfe?

“Well...” He sighs, rubbing his chin. I watch his eyes trace up and down my figure and immediately want to shower. “Aren’t you a beauty? Hunter always had a taste for brunettes.” He laughs, and I bite my lip to stop myself from saying anything.

I squeeze Hunter’s hand to give him some reassurance. I know what his father is trying to do. Within seconds of meeting him, he’s trying to create a wedge between us.

“None of them compare to her, though, Father,” Hunter responds, a note of conviction in his tone, taunting his father.

I think I hear a scoff from somewhere in the room. Of course, he's broken some hearts. We all have a past. Mine may not involve a multitude of men, but it is full of heartbreak for other reasons.

"Pfft." Thomas waves his hand as though he's trying to get rid of a fly buzzing around his face. "This, ladies and gentlemen, is the daughter of Arthur and Miriam Redmont," he shouts to the other partygoers.

Whispers and hushed voices ripple through the crowd. I sense their eyes on me, and I want to run and hide from these people.

It is Hunter's turn to comfort me. He rubs my knuckles with his thumb. My heartbeat is so erratic I'm scared it will burst from my chest.

"Aelina..." He stewes on my name, walking back and forth in the middle of the room, the crowd surrounding us. "By the looks of things, you're exactly like your parents. Sneaky and corrupt."

My eyebrows pull in. What does he mean by that statement? "You don't know me," I say, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

Thomas laughs, and it's haunting as it echoes around the vast space. "I know what blood runs in your veins. The blood of a traitor."

The tension in the room sizzles. I pull my body upright, determined to stand tall in front of this man. His words mean nothing to me.

I open my mouth to respond, but Hunter cuts in. "It's become apparent that the fault is on both sides. Granny and May are responsible for removing the girls. They did it to protect them, to give them a life away from the lies and betrayals that run rampant in this underworld." He releases my hand and takes a step toward his father. "The

way you have been running things, we all may as well hold our breaths for a bullet between the eyes. You're dealing with families who we would never have worked with because of what they stand for... death ."

Whispers kick up again around the room, and I'm left speechless. Was this the plan all along?

"That's enough," Thomas shouts, and silence fills the room. "How dare you speak out against me?"

"I want to take a vote. Right here, right now. I'm here to remove my father from his role as king of the underworld. I put my own name in and wish for your votes. This man, my father..." Hunter points to the red-faced Thomas, whose breathing has become heavy. Ezra is close behind him, but Hunter continues, "He has been holding Aelina's mother hostage simply to get Aelina in the same room as him."

Neither he nor Landon filled me in on exactly how this was to go down. It's probably a good thing, as I don't know if I would have gone along with the plan. As it is, the fear I felt is nothing like what's brewing in me now.

"Now, now..." Thomas appears to have pulled his temper in check. He waves his arms in a way that shows he wants Hunter to be quiet. When the murmurs stop, he continues, "This is all hearsay. There is no proof to this allegation."

"Think again, old Tom."

31

All heads spin to the door we walked through moments ago, searching for the deep voice. My father stands there with a woman who could only be my mother, who looks as though she's gone a few rounds in a boxing ring. Dark purple bruises paint her cheeks and both her eyes. My father has his arm around her waist, supporting her as she clings to him for dear life, her knuckles white.

"Oh my..." I rush from Landon, Hunter, and Levi's protection, going straight to my mother.

Either she doesn't know who I am, or the obvious beating she's endured has clouded her vision because she flinches when I reach for her. Her face is damp from tears, and I pull my hands back.

"It's okay, Miriam. This is our daughter, Aelina," Arthur says.

Water fills her eyes, and she stretches out her shaking hand. I take it, her smooth skin pressing against mine. I study her, taking in all her features. It's like looking in a mirror despite the bruising and swelling.

"How did you get in here?" Thomas roars, charging toward us.

Heavy footsteps quickly step up beside my mother. My family.

There's a rush of shoes on the wooden floor, and Hunter, Landon, and Levi are standing in front of my father, mother, and me. I tightly grip my mother's hand,

though she still clings to Arthur.

“Enough!” Hunter shouts.

Ezra is behind Thomas with his gun unholstered, firmly in his hand. Landon’s gun is also out, though it’s not raised.

My gaze darts around the room, and I notice people have moved farther back from our small group.

Thomas stabs a finger at Hunter. “You’re a traitor. You’re not my son if you choose to stand with this traitorous family.”

“That family is more of a family than you ever were, and she...” he gestures to me, “is going to be my wife. I don’t care what you say. You’re out. I’ve recently reached out to a number of other families and filled them in on all of your little secrets. For example, sending Miles Redmont to kill his own sister. He killed Nash Redmont and has made an attempt on my fiancée’s life recently.”

Hunter faces all the people in the room. I have no idea who they are, but they must be people of importance, or I don’t think Thomas would have them here as witnesses.

Thomas drops his head, and when it comes back up, those black eyes cloud over, and all I can see there is pure hate. The kind that grows and festers in someone for so long that it overtakes their soul.

“Do not disrespect Father like that.” Ezra steps forward, holding the gun upright and pointing directly at Hunter. My stomach plummets to the floor. I need him alive and safe. There’s movement on my left, and my gaze shifts. Landon’s gun is pointed at Ezra.

The lasso around my chest pulls tighter.

“I blame you for all the years I missed with my family.” My father’s words draw my attention, and before I focus on him, a gunshot echoes in the room. My ears ring, muffled by the loud sound in such a confined space. I drop to the floor, as does everyone else. My entire body trembles with fear, and I have an urgent desire to run. I slip off my shoes, ready to do just that.

I notice someone on their knees when I get the confidence to look up. My father stands upright, his weapon pointed in the direction of Thomas Wolfe’s crouching body. Hunter, Landon, and Levi still surround my mother and me.

I go to stand, and Landon catches my movement, clicking his tongue. My focus flicks to him, and he shakes his head. I pause, then go back to the floor.

“Ezra, let us help,” Hunter says gently, stepping forward.

Ezra rises, as does Thomas. “No. We don’t need you,” he hisses.

“It wasn’t my intention for blood to be spilled.”

“I don’t care.” There are tears in his eyes. He really respects his father.

Thomas’ head comes up, his white shirt stained with rich red blood. “Kill them all,” Thomas says between gasped breaths, his hand clutching his chest.

I stand, unable to sit and do nothing anymore. Ezra’s face meets mine, and his gun comes up. Another loud bang fills the room, only this time, I’m toppling sideways. My arm stretches out in an attempt to break my fall, but it’s not enough as my body slams into the floor, my head smacking against the wooden planks, a sharp pain stabbing me in the temple.

Then there's blackness.

32

Where am I?

My eyes open, and it's bright, too bright. My hands come up to shield myself from the overbearing light.

"Aelina, are you all right?"

"Hunter? Is that you?" The pain in my head forces me to close my eyes.

"Yes, it's me." Warm lips press against my forehead, and my body jerks a little.

"Are we in a car?" I whisper.

"We're in an ambulance. You hit your head when Landon pushed you out of the way."

I peek through my eyelashes. Hunter only wears his white shirt and suit pants, a torn expression on his face.

"Where's Landon? Is he all right?"

His hand rubs nervously against his chest, his eyes meet mine, and I know something is wrong. "He was shot. He took the bullet that was meant for you. He's in critical condition, but we're heading to the same hospital as him, so we'll know more soon."

One of my arms drops to my stomach. Landon took a bullet for me. My face screws up, and the burning behind my eyelids is too much. Tears well, then slide down my face, pooling into my hair. “Hunter—”

“Miss,” someone interrupts. “Do you have any medical conditions we should know about? Are you allergic to any medication?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Is there any chance you could be pregnant?” the paramedic asks.

I bite my bottom lip, frightened to give my response. “I am pregnant,” I finally answer.

“What?” Hunter roars, and my stomach twists itself into a million knots.

Finally, the brightness doesn’t hurt my eyes, and I look up at Hunter. A wild expression is on his face as he runs his hand through his hair.

“Do you know how far along you are?” the paramedic asks.

I shake my head. “No. I found out a couple of days ago. I think it’s early, maybe five or so weeks?” My voice shakes as I speak.

I want Hunter to comfort me. To hold my hand, assure me that everything is going to be all right, and there is nothing wrong with our baby.

What if the fall I took...

I stop myself from that train of thought. I don’t want to think that our baby may be gone already.

I place a hand over my scrunched eyes, and a warm hand wraps around the one I have placed on my stomach. Hunter's forehead presses against mine.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he whispers.

"Because you wouldn't have let me come tonight. I needed to save my mother. I don't have much family left." My voice cracks.

"You're right about that. There's no way you would have stepped foot in the door to that place tonight. I would have found a way to get your mother out." His lips press against my cheek. "I was worried I'd lost you. It was like Landon had a sixth sense and stepped in. I owe him my life."

I pull my hand away, Hunter's face hovering over mine. Tears shine on his cheeks. "Landon knew about my pregnancy," I say softly.

Hunter snaps upright. "You told him but not me?" he questions accusingly.

"He found out the night he followed me into the city. He saw me purchase the test. I'm so sorry, Hunter. I was going to tell you earlier, but everything was happening so fast."

Hunter opens his mouth to respond when the paramedic interrupts us. "Excuse me, we're about to pull into the emergency entrance. We'll get you booked in and checked out with the doctor." His soft eyes hold my gaze.

I nod, and Hunter sits upright, not looking at me. My chest aches. I need him.

"Can you tell me how the guy is who was shot?" Hunter asks before the back doors swing open.

“I’m not sure. I heard he was critical. He might be in surgery right now.” The paramedic jumps out of the ambulance and starts rattling off my stats to the doctors who have come to meet the ambulance.

The bed is pulled out, and I look around, panic slowly creeping through my veins. Hunter, where are you?

“I’m right here.” Hunter’s low words come from behind me. I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment.

He’s here.

Everything will be all right.

He’s most likely processing the news.

I’m put into a bay, and the doctors attach me to new machines, showing my heart rate is elevated. I have to calm down.

A female doctor comes toward me. “Good evening, Miss Redmont. Your chart says you’re pregnant. Do you know how far along?” She places my folder on the bedside table, taking her stethoscope from around her neck. She presses it against the red satin of the dress, which now has a broken strap.

“Um...I’m only about five or six weeks, I think. I only did the test a couple of days ago.” I glance at Hunter, and his haunting stare frightens me. What is he thinking?

“Lean forward, please.”

I do as I’m asked. My body doesn’t ache. I feel good, given that I knocked myself out on a wooden floor.

The doctor steps back. “All right, your chest sounds good. We’re going to take some blood, and we won’t do an ultrasound just yet. When you’re five weeks, things are still really early. If you’re not bleeding, that’s a good sign. I’ll give you the name of an OBGYN you can call to get one done in about two weeks.”

I nod as she speaks, noting I haven’t felt any dampness in my underwear, so I guess that’s a good sign.

“Thank you, doctor. Can you tell me about a patient who came in with a bullet wound?” Hunter asks.

Her eyes narrow at Hunter, then drop to me. “Your friend is in surgery at the moment. I’m sorry I don’t have any more news. You should know the police are on their way here. It’s policy to report all gunshot wounds.” She picks up my chart and scribbles something on it. Then she reaches into her coat, produces a card, and hands it to me. “This is the doctor. She is lovely and will assist you with your pregnancy.”

“Thank you so much,” I say with a weak smile.

“The nurse will be here shortly to take your blood.”

“Okay,” I say.

Silence falls between Hunter and me. I clear my throat. “How are my mother and father? What happened when I blacked out? I remember gunshots.” I hope no one else was injured.

Hunter clears his throat. “So your father went and shot mine.”

“I remember that.”

“Well, after that, Ezra lost his mind and went straight for you. He shot, but then Landon intervened, pushing you out of the way. Levi shot Ezra, and Thomas got away.”

“Got away? Even after being shot?” Is the man invincible?

“Yes. His henchman came and took him away. He’s got friends who are doctors who will help him. But he’s out. He won’t be running things from now on. I can see why my mother left him all those years ago, but he’d made her stick around for show. To keep the face of the family appear secure.”

“What do you mean? You’ve not mentioned your mother before.”

“I didn’t want to include her. I told her to stay away last night, and I’m so glad she did, or she would have been forced to go with my father.”

What horrible man does that to his wife?

“Don’t worry. She’s safe and will be kept in a safe house from now on.”

“Oh, that’s good.” He’s never mentioned his mother before. Given the situation, perhaps he feels he needs to give me all the details now. “I hope to meet her one day.” I’m met with silence once again, and I don’t know how much more I can take. Taking a deep breath, I say, “It’s okay if you don’t want to be a part of this baby’s life. I know that ruling the families of the underworld is going to be your job. May and my mother can help me.” My hands twist together in my lap.

Hunter’s hands ball into fists, then release. He finally sits down beside me and takes my hand. “Stop. Just because I’m upset with how I found out, with how you kept this from me and put yourself and our baby in danger, doesn’t mean you and this baby aren’t more important to me than anything. I love you so much.” He leans over and

presses his lips to mine.

My body warms and a wave of relief washes over me. “I love you too,” I breathe out against his lips.

33

A couple of hours later, I've had my blood taken and been discharged. Hunter has already emailed the office of the OBGYN the lovely doctor recommended to us. He keeps asking me how I'm feeling, and I remind him that I'm fine.

We're sitting in the waiting room with a few other people. Every time a doctor comes in, we look at them, hopeful they'll have some answers.

Another hour passes. It's already been four. I shut my eyes, the exhaustion from everything setting in.

"Family of Landon Sinclair."

I bolt upright. Hunter follows and takes my hand, walking toward the doctor who spoke.

Her face appears worn. She wears scrubs, her hair tied back in a neat ponytail.

"We're his family," Hunter says as we get closer.

"Please come with me."

My stomach drops. Is Landon dead? My bottom lip trembles, and I can't stop it. I pull it between my teeth and bite it, but all it does is cause my jaw to shake.

We follow her into a private office, where she gestures for us to sit in the chairs in

front of a plain white desk. She then takes the seat behind it. I'm already preparing myself for the worst.

"I'm Doctor Remi Taylor. I operated on Mr. Sinclair," she says, opening a manila folder in front of her. "The bullet had lodged itself near his heart."

My hand flies to my mouth, and I suck in a breath. Tears fill my eyes. Hunter squeezes my hand firmly in his grasp.

"Is he...?" My voice cracks.

"No. Mr. Sinclair is alive, but he's very critical. We've put him in an induced coma as his body needs to heal. The time it takes for his body to heal will determine when we slowly lift the drugs holding him in his current state."

"So he's all right?" I breathe.

"He's not out of the woods yet. He's still got a lot of healing to do. He's going to be in the hospital for some time." Her face meets mine.

"Thank you for saving his life." I reach over and squeeze her hand.

"It's my job. Now, I understand you've spoken to the police already?"

We both nod. We were interviewed as soon as I was discharged and told the police that Ezra had shot Landon, and then Levi shot Ezra in self-defense. It's mostly the truth. "Okay, that's good."

"Can we see him?" Hunter asks, appearing worn down. He's received numerous phone calls from people who, I'm guessing, once worked for his father. He now has a mess to sort out with the underworld to make it a better place. The weight of the

world is on his shoulders now.

“Yes.” She rises from her chair, and we anxiously follow.

She leads us to the ICU area of the hospital, and before she opens the door to a room, she gestures to a box of masks and a bottle of hand sanitizer. Hunter and I slip on a mask and thoroughly rub our hands with the antibacterial liquid.

“Typically, no one is allowed in here, but I can make a brief exception given the circumstances.”

Landon lays peacefully on the bed, his eyes shut. The machines around him beep, and I rush to his side, taking his hand gently.

“I’m so sorry, Landon.” I weep. He shouldn’t be the one in this bed. It should have been me.

“I’ll give you a moment. Talk to him. He may not be able to respond, but they say it helps. If you need anything, please let me know.” The surgeon quietly exits the room.

“Hunter, I’m so sorry. If I had told you, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Hunter comes to me and wraps me in his arms. I break down, sobbing into his shirt.

“This may or may not have happened. We’ll never know the outcome of any other situation. Landon is a fighter, and I know he’ll pull through this. I’ll make sure he has the best care and is kept under careful watch. My father is a dead man if I ever catch him unless he’s already dead. I can only hope.”

“Still, this is all my fault.”

Hunter brushes his hand through my hair, which drapes down my back. “No, it’s not. This is because of my father’s hate and his taste for power. Everything will be all right,” he assures me, but I don’t feel settled.

At least, before, Hunter knew where he was.

If anything, I’m more scared because now I don’t know if the man who wanted me dead is alive or not.

* * *

We sit with Landon briefly before exhaustion catches up with me. The sun is slowly peeking over the horizon, and I can’t remember the last time I slept. My body feels wrecked and has begun to ache, and my head is pounding.

“Let’s go. We’ll get some rest and come back.”

We say our goodbyes and leave, grateful for the time allowed with him.

As we drive down the familiar driveway leading to May’s, my head rests against the window, and Hunter’s hand sits on my leg. I feel completely wrecked, as though a truck has run me over.

The doctor had warned me I might experience aches and headaches, so I’ve been expecting this. But now that it has hit, I’m not sure I can endure much more.

Pulling up, we’re greeted by May. She rushes and pulls me into her arms, tears filling her eyes. “I’d thought the worst. How is the baby?” Her hand flies to her mouth.

“It’s okay. He knows now.” I smile weakly.

Hunter comes to my side and pulls me against him.

I need sleep—a lot of it.

“There are people here to see you, Aelina. But I can tell them that you need to rest.”

My head comes off Hunter’s shoulder where I’d placed it moments ago. “Mom and Dad?”

She nods.

“I want to see them.”

“They’re inside waiting,” she responds.

My mouth dries up when I step into the house. My mother and father stand in the kitchen, and I pause, taking them in. My mother doesn’t look as bad as she did when I first laid eyes on her.

I watch as her hands come up to her mouth, her eyes glistening. They both come toward me, but Hunter doesn’t release me. It’s a good thing because I’m not sure I’d be able to stand upright, given how exhausted my body feels. It wants to shut down for several hours.

“Aelina?” My mother’s soft voice fills the room.

I nod.

She rushes toward me, and only then does Hunter release me, stepping aside. My mother envelops me in her arms and holds me while I cry. My father comes and wraps us both in his large arms.

After all the loneliness I've had in my life, my heart feels overwhelmed by love. I don't know these two people, but what I do know is that they're my family. They're my blood, and I want them in my life just like I want Hunter in my life.

Things are coming together, and my world is slowly being pieced back together.

After I've found my sisters, I'll marry Hunter.

For now, the people in this room are all that matter, and, of course, Landon. I'll forever be in his debt. A debt I intend to make good on.

I love Hunter, and together, we're going to rule the underworld and change how things are run.

EPILOGUE

ONE MONTH LATER

“Is there any more news on Landon?” May asks, coming through the door after being out and feeding the animals. She holds a bunch of mixed flowers from the garden surrounding the family burial plot.

“Not yet. Hunter hasn’t called this morning with an update. Which is unsettling,” I say, taking a small bite of my toast.

I’m really not feeling well this morning. The baby is healthy, and I will hopefully reach the end of this morning sickness soon. It should be called all-day, every-day sickness. It’s the worst.

“Still not feeling well, honey?”

I shake my head.

“Perhaps it’s the anxiety and stress over what happened, along with being pregnant.” She comes over and gently rubs my back.

She is most likely right. I’m so worried about Landon. He should be waking up at any moment now.

“Maybe. It’s been a crazy few months with everything going on. I can’t keep up, and I think I’m more of a hindrance than help most days. Because I’ve come in, in the

middle of something that was already well-established, I don't know what to do or how to help." I sigh, rubbing my forehead. "Hunter has been great, though, running things, checking in on Landon, ensuring he spends time with me, and making our doctor appointments."

I think about the past month and how Hunter crawls into bed late at night, pulling my body against his. His warmth wraps around every part of me. His hands will roam, and the heat intensifies. Those nights are usually late ones.

"I know that smile."

I pause, unaware I was smiling.

"You two are beautiful together, and I'm so glad you both have found happiness. When I look at you two, you remind me of myself and your grandfather." The wistful smile that brightens May's face brings tears to my eyes.

"I'm sad that I never got to meet him." I stand and walk toward her, opening my arms. We share an embrace as she reminisces.

"He was a great man. Had a wise-ass personality like Nash." We laugh.

I step back. "Have you seen Mom this morning?"

May nods. "She went to see Nash and Miles." Her eyes glaze over. "It's been a long time since she has seen either of them. Hunter's father did a good number on Miles, which is why he was such an angry boy."

We'd soon discovered from Hunter's brother, Levi, that his father was only using Miles to kill off his own family. He would have killed him and taken everything for himself when that was done.

“Perhaps I should go to her.”

“I think she would like that.” May hands me the bunch of flowers she’d been holding.

I place a light kiss on her cheek. “Love you, Granny.”

She giggles like a schoolgirl. Every time I use the word ‘Granny,’ she gets giggly, and nothing wipes the smile off her face.

“Love you, too, sweet grandbaby of mine and great-grandbaby.” She rubs my tummy.

I walk along the path to the family plot, and Mom sits on the same bench I did a while back when I read Nash’s words, which changed the course of my life.

“Hey, Mom,” I greet gently so I don’t scare her.

Turning in her seat, she smiles. “Hey, beautiful.”

We are still building our relationship. I heard her talking with May the other night, and she said she blames herself for everything that’s happened, even though none of this is her fault. Two grannies went out on a limb to try to prevent anything bad from happening to my sisters and me. It’s been a season of darkness for this family, and I can only hope that we—Mom, Dad, and I—can work through this and learn to love and grow together as a family moving forward.

Nash was right. Dad didn’t want to hurt me. Like Granny, he wanted to protect me.

Now, the Redmont men have been laid to rest side by side. There will always be an emptiness inside my chest that may never be filled again in my lifetime. These men were my blood, my family.

“How are you this morning?” I ask as I sit beside her, still holding the flowers.

Her arm comes around me. “You know how long I’ve waited for my family to come back together . . .” she pauses and turns to me, adding, “. . . a very long time.”

I’ve only known my mother for a short time, but already I can tell she’s this very quiet, meek woman. Everything about her is demure in some way—how she glides into a room, makes Dad smile, and holds my hair back when I’ve been throwing up my breakfast.

It’s something I’ve never experienced. I’ve always taken care of myself, and now I have a tribe of women and men who care deeply for me.

“I know, and when the time is right, we will find the other girls, and then we’ll be together.” Here’s hoping my sisters are willing to let us into their lives.

“I know it’s still not safe for them while Thomas is alive somewhere. I silently hope he’s dying in a ditch. Poor Esther. I’m sure she’s going through hell as well. Thomas was her only son, and he’s like the son of the devil.”

“Mom, we all make our choices, and this was his. He became money-hungry and deranged by power. There’s nothing we could do for someone like that.”

“I know. I still feel terrible about it, though.”

I catch a tear sliding down her cheek and quickly wipe it away. “It will be all right, Mom. Hunter and I plan to change things.” She has no idea that things have already been put into motion to eradicate the underworld of people who favor Thomas Wolfe.

“Hunter is a fine young man, and I’m so happy you have him.”

“I love him,” I say, unable to hide my smile.

She smiles. “I know, and he loves you. I see it in the way he responds to you. He’s

always aware of where you are and he becomes a different man when he's around you. I'm happy for both of you. When is the proper wedding planned?"

I look out over the property. This place would be perfect for a wedding, and one day, it will happen. But first, we have to deal with Thomas Wolfe.

"It will happen when the time is right." I stare down at the pink diamond resting on my finger.

The sound of crunching tires coming along the driveway has our heads turning. The butterflies in my belly kick up again. It's a habit now when I know it's Hunter. I miss him when he's away, even though I know he won't be gone for very long.

"He might have some news on Landon," I say, rising from my seat. I take the flowers in and divide them up among the three graves. Mom helps, then we wrap our arms around each other and make our way back to the house.

Hunter comes running up to me with a brilliant, wide grin.

"Landon has woken up. He's going to be all right. I also think his doctor is smitten with him. She's become this hound, shooing everyone away to give him his rest."

I grin. The heaviness that has been resting on my chest since he took that bullet for me finally lifts. I release Mom and step into Hunter's arms. "She's doing her job, and I'm so relieved he's okay." My throat thickens with emotion.

Hunter loosens his arms around me. "Morning, Miriam."

"Morning, Hunter. I'm happy to hear your friend is okay." She doesn't stop but keeps walking back to May, who is on the porch.

Hunter's gaze falls to mine. "I'm so glad he's going to be all right."

“Me too.”

He sweeps his fingers along my cheeks, cupping my face. “I love you, Little Red.”

“I love you too.”

He presses his lips to mine, and at this moment, everything is perfect. One day, the storm clouds will come again, but for now, the sun is shining, and my world is finally coming together in a way I never imagined.