







# Obsessed with Her (Kostanidis Family #3)

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**Category:** Urban

**Description:** Ares Kostanidis. Arrogant. Billionaire. Protector. A man who knows that the young woman he's sworn to guard is forbidden—but rules don't apply to him.

I never wanted a guardian because I didn't believe I needed protection—until secrets from my past revealed that my entire life was a lie.

He was obliged to become the guardian of a ballerina.

She had to obey the arrogant man.

From the first time he saw her, he wanted her, but he knew he had to stay away.

She was drawn to the Greek man but believed he was out of her league.

Unlike his brothers, Ares Kostanidis, the second eldest of the billionaire Greek clan, prefers fast motorcycles to luxury cars. Beautiful, sexy, and unconventional, he is known for his dark sense of humor, cynicism, and combative spirit.

He lives a life without forging emotional ties other than with his family, until fate forces him to become responsible for a young woman who is alone in the world.

Serenity Clementine Blanchet is an orphan who lost both parents at a young age. Sent to a boarding school in Germany, she dedicated herself compulsively to ballet, dance becoming her comfort zone.

She doesn't like change and loves routine, so when her guardian tells her that she will now be under the command of a Greek businessman, she feels insecure.

Ares is fascinated by the goddess with huge blue eyes, who seems fragile, but he resists giving in to desire.

One event, however, changes everything, bringing Serenity closer to him, and the tycoon will have to go from legal guardian to protector.

Ares

## CHAPTER ONE

### NEW YORK - SIN NIGHTCLUB

“Don't come here again. You weren't hired for that.”

I see the face of the woman, my employee, turn red as she clearly thinks about how to answer.

“I . . .”

“Let us both save our time. I don't go out with SIN dancers. You're beautiful, but I'm not interested. I never mix business and pleasure, and if you come to my office again, you can kiss your job goodbye”.

I can see that she's embarrassed, but I don't care. My mood, which normally fluctuates between boredom and anger, is shit right now.

I was leaving to solve an unexpected problem when, for the third time in a week, one of the new dancers invaded my office with the excuse of cleaning it.

This is not an isolated incident, involving a single employee, and I know it won't be the last. Eventually, one of them tries to jump in my bed, insinuate themselves. I've had to fire several who thought that because they worked for me, they would have some chance of seducing me, but I never mix sex with business.

I watch her retreat and leave with her head down, but I don't feel sorry for her. She knew the fucking rules when she was hired.

And right now, I have a much bigger problem to deal with.

Rey Cardona de la Vega.

The damn reclusive Spaniard with whom my brothers and I have been trying to close a deal for months, has made our lives a living hell with his stubbornness.

The man rarely leaves his castle and is almost never seen by the press. So when he agreed to come to SIN—my nightclub—on my birthday, to discuss the acquisition of his companies by our group, I knew I would need to find a way to soften him up.

An extra incentive.

Just like my brothers, I study my opponents and find their weak points.

Rey may be antisocial, but he's a man first and foremost, and from what I've heard, the only women he gets close to are high-end escorts.

We do not provide call girls here at SIN. My club's role is to fulfill fantasies for a small portion of the society, and I'm sure he knows that. Politicians, heads of state, kings, businessmen like me—men who have a lot to lose and who, for that reason, cannot satisfy some of their desires anywhere.

SIN has existed for two years, and becoming a member is almost a rite of passage, in which the candidate goes through a screening process and, shortly after, a background check.

There is a confidentiality agreement for both parties, as well as for the girls hired as a

fundamental part of the entertainment.

Here, customers can wear lingerie in a private room, parading for our girls. Or spend hours licking women's shoes, being pulled on leashes or beaten with whips.

The only thing they can't do is touch them, and that restriction, for most of them, is even more exciting.

There is no judgement.

There are no cameras in private rooms.

Cell phones are not permitted.

Hedonism is not only tolerated, it is encouraged.

SIN is the place for guilt-free pleasure, and my intention is that the Spaniard will be able to relax enough to do business with us.

I know that our proposal is not the only one Rey has received, and I also know that all the previous ones were refused, so I've planned something different for his entertainment and hired a dancer who speaks Spanish to give him a private dance.

It occurred to me that he would prefer to talk in his native language.

I found the perfect girl: Madison Foster? \* . Beautiful and a little awkward.

I interviewed her in person, I handpicked her, and now everything could be ruined by a damn chance encounter.

If someone had told me that my brother Zeus would be interested in her, I wouldn't

have believed them.

The oldest of the four of us is the pure image of a banker, and his women are always the same, like mass-produced replicas. I don't even know how you can differentiate one from the other, as they could pass for sisters.

Sophisticated, tall, beautiful, well-educated . . . fucking boring .

And now the bastard decides to be interested in precisely the one I chose to entertain Rey.

When the manager came to tell me that Zeus was in the room reserved for the Spanish businessman, I went straight there to undo the mistake, but the moment I entered the room where he was and saw his face, I knew my plan would have to be modified.

Right now, oblivious to Madison's performance, I watch him, because the bastard knows he shouldn't be here.

What the hell is happening?

The dancer hasn't seen me yet. She has her back to me, half-naked, but I feel so pissed that I don't even notice the generous curves I imagine she has.

When I open my mouth to speak, Zeus shakes his head, but I don't usually give up easily. I won't move until he talks to me.

Knowing that I won't give up, he gets up from the chair with a frown on his face. He passes by the dancer and says to her, "Don't leave."

Just then, the woman realizes that there is someone else in the room.

"She's supposed to dance for Rey," I say as we leave, and he closes the curtain behind us.

"No."

"What do you mean 'no' ? That's why I hired her."

"I want exclusivity with her."

I look at my brother like he's gone crazy. "Are you on drugs?"

"Idiot."

"No, I'm being serious. I've had this club for two years, and you've always hated coming here. Now you want exclusivity with the only unavailable dancer? Today was supposed to be just about business, big brother, so think with your brain and not your dick and let the woman do her job."

"I'll pay for the rest of the night, but she's not leaving this room until I say so."

"Jesus, now I'm sure you've gone crazy! There's no way you are going to compete for a dancer with a guy we're negotiating with."

"Pay another woman triple, but this one will be at my disposal today."

I stare at him in silence for a while before saying, "I hope you know what you're doing. Madison is a new hire, and I don't want to get sued for harassment."

"Madison what? What is her last name?"

"Foster."



"Don't come back here again," he says, going in and closing the curtain one more time.

Fuck me!

"What's wrong?" Hades, our youngest brother, asks when he bumps into me in the hallway. He seems to be heading towards my office.

I didn't even know he had come. He's not one for socializing, even when it comes to business.

"Zeus disrupting my life," I say. "Are you staying?"

"No. I just came to give you a hug. I'm sure you can manage the Spanish bastard without my help."

I run my hand through my hair worriedly, as I always do when I notice he's still caught up in his obsession. "Where are you going at this hour, Hades?"

"I received a promising lead as to his whereabouts."

"Fuck me! You need to let this shit go, brother. It's over."

"This will never end until they both pay for what they did."

He doesn't give me time to argue, turning and leaving without looking back.

\* ? The FMC from "Seduced by Contract."

Ares

### CHAPTER TWO

Weeks later

A fucking avalanche. That is what Zeus's meeting with Madison turned into.

For years, my brother has sought revenge against the family that destroyed ours. It was a promise made to our paternal grandfather to buy the bank that belongs to our enemies, making the surname “Gordon” a joke.

My brother has lived his entire existence guided by that promise.

And then, suddenly, the most balanced of the four of us went crazy for the woman who was supposed to be an adventure only, until the time came for him to fulfill the rules of a signed agreement which would result in the end of more than a decade in search of revenge.

I could see the fucking chaos coming a mile away. The moment Zeus demanded that Madison never do exclusive dances again, performing only on stage, I guessed he was heading down a path of no return.

He decided to pay the equivalent of what she would collect from private dances, just so she wouldn't be alone with another man.

In fact, I know he demanded Madison's resignation, but it wasn't successful, since

she's not the docile type.

If he wasn't creating hell for himself, I might find it amusing to see him, always so centered, crazy about a much younger girl with no sophistication whatsoever. Nothing in my mood even comes close to that, though.

I and my two other brothers, Dionysus and Hades, as well as our cousins Odin and Christos? \* , decided to get together to find a solution to the problem that has now arisen, since Zeus, even if he himself hasn't realized it yet, no longer seems willing to fulfill his part of the agreement with Gordon, the patriarch of the rival family.

Once the pact between the two is broken, we will never be able to acquire the GordonBank shares we need.

Even when I thought that Madison was just temporary in my brother's life, there was already a chance that our plans had gone to hell, because Gordon is traditional and hates scandals. Just a small leak of the relationship between Zeus and Madison would have been enough to make him back off.

A banker having an affair with a dancer? There could be no bigger scandal in New York.

When we invited him to this meeting at Dionysus's house, Zeus didn't know what we had planned—he thought it was just lunch. But as soon as he arrived, he realized that it was no accident that even Christos, who lives in North Carolina, had come.

"It's no coincidence that you're all here," Zeus says, stating the obvious.

“No, it's not,” I reply.

He looks at me and understands that the meeting is related to Madison.

"Let's go outside," Dionysus proposes. "The nanny who's with Joseph? \* is a new hire, and I don't like the idea of her being by the pool with him without my supervision."

We sit on chairs around a table, in the shade of a tree, and soon a maid appears to offer drinks.

"I can't stay long," Zeus warns.

"Why not?" Odin asks, even though we all already know the answer.

"I have a date," he says.

"With Madison ?" I ask, because diplomacy has never been my strong point.

"What is this? Because if you think I believe that this meeting was by chance, you don't know me that well."

"It wasn't by chance," Hades confirms. "It's an attempt to stop you from destroying your own life."

"Conversations in code aren't my specialty," my older brother growls, irritated.

"No, they're mine," Odin says, showing an unusually good sense of humor.

"Just tell me what you need."

"We have an alternative for your situation with Gordon."

"I'm not going to break the promise I made to my grandfather."

"What exactly was that?" the oldest of us all, Christos, continues. "As far as I know, it was to destroy their entire fortune to avenge your father's death."

"Yes, and to wipe their centuries-old name off the map. That's why I made the deal. There's no other way to bring them down. I've been doing research for years."

"We're buying shares in GordonBank ," Odin says.

"What?"

"For many months, we've been buying shares in GordonBank ," says Christos.

"That's not possible," interrupts Zeus. "He's been preventing any sales linked to my surname, and everyone knows we're cousins."

"We're using small companies that are part of our conglomerate, mine and Odin's, but that aren't directly linked to us," Christos says. "Separately, we don't own enough shares to have the board in the palm of our hands, but when we add our shares together, we're only one percent away from achieving majority ownership. Fifty-one percent. When that happens, we'll create a third company that will have complete control of GordonBank ."

"And then we'll sell it to you," Odin adds, while I notice my brother trying to absorb that game-changer.

I know his way of thinking. Zeus knows that if our cousins' plan works, we will obtain our revenge against the Gordons, he will be free from the old man's blackmail, and at the same time, he won't fail to fulfill the promise he made to our grandfather.

"Say something," Hades says.

"How long until you get that one percent?"

"It's been more challenging than we thought because the current owner isn't a professional but an orphan girl, represented by her guardian," Christos explains.

"Offer them triple."

"We're trying, but he's resisting because it seems like it's the only inheritance left for the girl, who's been living in an all-girls orphanage since she lost her parents."

"Either way, when my plans come to fruition, there won't be anything left of what was once known as GordonBank," he says. "The shares will be worth less than discarded candy wrappers. Selling will be a good move for her."

"What are you going to do about the employees?" Odin asks.

"Redistribute them among my companies and my brothers' companies. I won't leave over a hundred and fifty thousand people unemployed."

"It's a high number," Christos says. "But we can also relocate them to some of our businesses. And for those who are of retirement age, offer some sort of incentive."

"Why did you do this?" Zeus asks.

"I wouldn't let you ruin your life over a promise," my cousin Odin replies.

"The penalty for breaking the contract with Gordon will be high," I say.

"No. For him to enforce our agreement, he would have to hold the majority of the shares," Zeus explains. "If Christos and Odin can secure that last one percent, he's finished. Even if he negotiates with all the other shareholders, which is highly

unlikely, he'll never get more than forty-nine percent."

"It's going to be a blow to the old man." Dionysus laughs, because there is no mercy in our hearts for anyone who bears the surname Gordon. Because of that damn family, our father gave up on life.

"Gordon is made of tough stuff," I say. "Besides, he's no better than that bastard's dead son. Emerson is nothing more than a damn blackmailer."

After weeks of being tense as hell, I finally feel a little more relieved.

If everything goes well, the promise to our grandfather will be fulfilled and my brother won't have to destroy his future for it.

\* ? They are the protagonists of About Love and Revenge and The Tycoon's Obsession , respectively.

\* ? He is Dionysus's son. It's important to note that, at this point, Cici, the protagonist of book 2 in the current series had not yet entered Dionysus's life.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm*

Ares

### CHAPTER THREE

Months later

NEW YORK

"Any news about the damn one percent?" Zeus asks me on the phone. Odin and Christos have not been successful in acquiring what is missing yet.

"No, but I have a plan. The girl's guardian is almost a hundred years old, and I think he fears for his ward's fate," I say.

"And what do you plan to do?"

"Besides offering five times the market value, I'll secure a professional guardian for the little girl."

"Do you think he's worried about dying and leaving her helpless?"

"Yes. By offering to buy the shares for much more than they're worth and also solving the guardianship issue, she'll be protected."

"How old is the child?" he asks.

"She's not a child; she's a teenager. Seventeen, but according to what I found out, she



can only access the inheritance at twenty-one, and only if she's married. Otherwise, she needs to wait until she's twenty-five."

"Her father was an idiot," he growls.

"I can't disagree, but maybe his intentions were good. The problem is he made his daughter incapable of managing her own life as an adult. If she were my girl, I'd also find it reasonable to impose the age of twenty-one for her to inherit the entire fortune, but not requiring her to get married."

"Sort this out, Ares. I can't wait to close the matter." He sounds anxious.

I know Gordon has been pushing him more and more every day. In any other situation, my brother would tell the son-of-a-bitch patriarch to fuck off, but without the one percent of shares we lack, that would mean the end of any chance to enact our revenge.

Days later

"I think the best thing to do is to meet the guardian in person," I say, already fed up with this shit.

We are in Zeus's office, at the headquarters of our bank. Although we are all not only shareholders but also on the Board of Directors, it is my brother who occupies the position of CEO, since Dionysus, Hades, and I have separate businesses.

"Fucking stubborn man!" he growls. "What more could he want?"

"A guarantee. He would not accept me hiring a professional guardian. But talking on the phone isn't working. I suggest we go there together."

"New Orleans?"

"Yes. When would be a good date?"

"ASAP. The issue should have already been resolved."

"Then I'll go ahead and organize the trip to Louisiana."

"Do it. Even if I need to pay ten times the value of the shares, I will only return when we acquire what is needed to become majority shareholders of GordonBank."

"Do you think you will be able to resolve everything?" Hades asks, sitting next to me in a piano bar.

In the past, when we went out together, it was to parties on our yachts or those of friends, like Vincenzo, but my brother is less and less interested in anything other than his obsession.

"I think so. It's not the solution I want, but from what I can tell, it's the only possible one," I say.

"And what would that be?"

"I will take on the role of the girl's guardian."

"Shit!" He groans, and even though he doesn't speak, it's clear what he thinks of the idea: it'll be a fucking nightmare.

Who in their right mind would want to take care of a teenager? Not me, that's for sure.

"It won't be personal. I'll keep my distance and just make sure Serenity has everything she needs until she's old enough to take possession of her assets."

"After she gets married? The idea is ridiculous! Forcing her to make a commitment at twenty-one years old just to have money to support herself seems like the kind of stipulation that would have been made in the Middle Ages."

"No. In the Middle Ages, she would probably have had to get married at twelve or thirteen years old," I say sardonically. Even though his intentions were good, I can't help but despise her father a little for putting a clause like that in his will.

"What do you intend to do? From what I've heard, the girl is at a boarding school in Germany."

I don't wonder how Hades knows these details. The four of us are extremely controlling, but my brother is a whole other level. Other people's privacy is a term he doesn't understand if our interests are at stake.

"She was. Serenity turned eighteen yesterday, but she'd already moved back to New Orleans a few days ago."

"Do you have any plans for her?"

"As I said before, if her current guardian accepts me as her new guardian, I will supervise her from a distance. I'll assign some of my men to watch her, of course, but apart from that, she'll have her freedom—on condition that she doesn't do anything stupid. She is very young and must be naïve too, as she's been at a German boarding school from the age of five."

"Fuck me! Was she practically a baby when she was orphaned?"

"Yes. I know there is a nanny who has been with her for a long time. Still works for the girl. This woman, I believe, is the only connection to the past that the girl still has."

"And the current legal guardian?"

"As I mentioned before, he is almost a hundred years old and sick. That's the reason why he's so hesitant to authorize the sale of the shares. He wants to ensure that his ward will have some assets when she is older."

"Does that mean he's protective of her?"

"I don't think so. He's fulfilling a legal obligation, nothing more."

He stares at me in silence, and I know he wants to say something more.

"What?"

"Serenity will be the perfect target for sons of bitches. Regardless of whether she is beautiful or ugly, they will be all over her like flies on honey. Young, orphaned, inexperienced, and an heiress. The girl is the complete package."

I drum my fingers on the wooden top of the bar counter. It's a bit of a tic I have when I'm making a decision.

I've thought about what he's saying, of course. Kostanidis blood is like a damn disease—we carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. When someone belongs to us, whether permanently or temporarily, we become fierce defenders.

"Maybe I could convince her to move to New York."

"It won't work. She's studied ballet her entire life. She's just been accepted by one of the best schools in the country, in New Orleans. She wants to become a professional."

"She could audition for the Joffrey Ballet School. Our family has been donating to this dance school for decades and I am confident that we could get the girl accepted."

"I've already thought about all that, Hades."

"And?"

"As I said before, I don't intend to make our relationship so personal. Serenity will be fine in Louisiana. I will make sure that she has everything she needs, and I will organize a veritable army to look after her, with well-trained bodyguards."

"Do you think she'll stay single until she's twenty-five?"

"As far as I know, she's never dated, but if her intention is to get married at twenty-one to get her hands on the money she's entitled to, she'll need my approval. That's what's in the will."

"And do you intend to intervene if you think the chosen one is no good?" He gives me a semblance of a smile, and even that, for my brother, is rare.

"If I think she's making a bad choice, I won't just intervene. I will make her understand that she will have to obey me."

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm*

Serenity

### CHAPTER FOUR

Two weeks later

### NEW ORLEANS

"You know you don't have to do this anymore, JeAnne. I'm not a baby."

"Yes. You are a young lady now," she says, but she remains behind me at the dressing table, brushing my hair.

I roll my eyes, trying to hide a smile. JeAnne has been my nanny for as long as I can remember. I don't remember my parents if I don't look at their photographs, but in every childhood memory, my beloved JeAnne is there.

"I'm an adult. Young lady sounds like a teenager."

"Hum."

"What does that 'hum' mean?"

"Don't take what I'm going to say the wrong way. I'm so happy that you're finally back home, but I'm worried that now someone will try to take advantage of your innocence. You don't know anything about life."

My parents, apparently, were very careful in their legal arrangements for me in case they died, which in fact happened when I was only five years old.

Since we have no relatives left on either side, they assigned a guardian to take care of me, Mr. Van Lith. He was already very old, even when I was still a little girl, and he was ill at the time of my parents' death. As I later learned, I was cared for by JeAnne for almost two months before he finally came to see me.

We were never close. JeAnne is my only family, and I will always be grateful to her for dedicating her entire life to me.

When I went to boarding school in Germany, Mr. Van Lith wanted to send her away. I was still very little, but I cried for almost a week, begging him to let her stay.

He gave in, and in those thirteen years since I lost my parents, she became my family.

Besides her, my main love is ballet.

"If you're talking about boys, you don't need to worry. I am not interested. I just want to be the greatest ballerina of all time."

"Just that?" she jokes. "Very modest, Miss Blanchet."

I put on a serious expression and hold her hand over my shoulder, looking at her in the mirror. "I don't know how to be anything else, JeAnne. Being a professional dancer is my life goal."

She kisses me on the head. "So that's what you will be."

"Mr. Van Lith said he wants to talk to me next week. What do you think it's about?"

"Probably to account for your inheritance. As you said, you are an adult now."

"I'm an adult, but I won't be independent until I get married at twenty-one or turn twenty-five as a single lady."

"He's always been a good provider. You won't need to get married to access your fortune. Wait for the right time."

"Yes, I know, and to be honest, I don't care about the money. As long as I have enough to keep up with ballet classes and buy everything I need to dance, that's fine with me."

I bite my bottom lip, thinking about what I want to ask my guardian next week.

"What's bothering you?" she asks.

"Do you think Mr. Van Lith will agree to me setting up a ballet studio in one of the spare rooms in the house?"

"I think so. Why would he deny you something like that?"

"I don't know. I have no idea how much money I have."

"I'm sure there's enough. But I thought you would prefer to train at the dance school."

"No. I want to be able to train for hours, even outside of class time. Practice makes perfect, JeAnne. At boarding school, even though I had access to ballet classes twice a day, I felt frustrated when the teacher finished class. She only let me continue training for another hour afterward. If I have a room here at home, I can practice whenever I want."



"There are six free rooms, Serenity. I'm sure your guardian won't refuse to set up one for your training."

A week later

"I don't know if I understood you correctly," I say, when in fact I did, and very well. So well that I feel sick.

"I'm very old, Miss, and thinking about what's best for you. That's why I'm looking for someone else to take my place."

"Is it better for me if you are no longer my guardian?" I ask, trying not to show how sad the news makes me.

Even though he never acted anything but professionally towards me, I hate change.

I live my life guided by rules.

How much to eat to avoid gaining weight. How many hours for sufficient sleep in order to be able to train better. And I have always completed my studies with almost the same dedication as I do when it comes to dancing.

Losing my parents at a young age made me insecure. I created a world of my own, where everything works perfectly as long as I follow the rules.

And now, he's telling me about the possibility, not of just any change, but rather, that perhaps soon I'll have to obey a total stranger.

"I don't understand why this is necessary."

"A new guardian? It is a testamentary requirement from your parents. You know that

perfectly well. He will protect your rights and assets until you are old enough to enjoy them. Believe me, it's the best solution for you, Miss Blanchet."

Serenity

### CHAPTER FIVE

#### NEW ORLEANS

I undo the bun that JeAnne insisted on combing my hair into when I left the house to come to my ballet practice and create another one, pulling it tighter.

She still treats me like a child sometimes. I have few good memories from my childhood, but the ones I have are with her around me, always vigilant and careful.

Every time I came back to the US during vacation from German school, she would be waiting for me with my favorite foods. Boarding school was scary for me. I was taken away from home when I was very young and forced to live with strangers. Suddenly, I lost the home I knew, my entire family, and was sent away from my beloved nanny.

I shake my head sadly, thinking about how unhappy I feel that my memory belongs to moments with JeAnne and not my parents. I don't allow myself to be melancholy for too long, though. At the start of practice, I need to be fully focused.

I look in the bathroom mirror at the dance school and notice that my hair is now exactly how I like it—so straight that it makes my eyes stand out at the corners, even though they're usually big compared to the rest of my face.

Perfection is my goal in life, in any area. I am demanding of myself, and I like order.

I don't feel happy with surprises or uncertainty, and that's why these last few weeks I've felt like the ground has disappeared from beneath my feet.

I've dreamed about this moment my whole life! While growing up in boarding school, I imagined when I would finally turn eighteen and be able to take care of myself, investing in my career as a dancer.

The first disappointment came with my guardian's visit as soon as I returned to the United States. That was when I learned that my parents had left very clear stipulations in their will. There would only be two ways in which I could access my inheritance: at age twenty-one, provided I was married, or at age twenty-five if I remained single. Practically, this prevents me from growing up and being independent.

I am an adult, however, an adult who is believed to need supervision.

I was devastated. Thank God I have JeAnne by my side, since Mr. Van Lith, despite never letting me lack for anything, has never been more than a stranger to me, an employee of my parents who only kept in touch with me out of duty.

I'm not the malleable type, not one who adapts easily. I am rigid like a marble surface and tense like a stretched guitar string.

Discipline is my true north.

I had a hard time getting used to the news, but I tried to adapt to the reality that I couldn't be free. With my nanny and only friend by my side, I took a deep breath and was sure I could do this.

It was then that Mr. Van Lith dropped the bomb: the certainty, no longer the possibility, that I will have a new guardian. I'd still had hope that he would go back

on his decision to transfer my guardianship to someone else.

Only yesterday, when I went to his office for the second time in a few days, responding to a call, did I discover the reason.

Apparently, my father owned a one percent share in a bank in which the man who will be my new guardian, Mr. Ares Kostanidis, is interested. Mr. Van Lith didn't say it outright, but from my point of view, he is blackmailing Mr. Kostanidis, saying that he will only sell this one percent if the man, whom I discovered is a Greek businessman, takes over my guardianship.

I was so shaken by the news about the changes that would soon happen in my life that I ended up forgetting to ask for permission to set up a private dance studio at home.

Now, if the Greek businessman really becomes my guardian, I will have to talk to him about it.

Dealing with a stranger, whose personality I have no idea of, and more than that, asking him for a favor, leaves me terrified.

And to make matters worse, Mr. Van Lith said that, for now, the news about my change of guardianship is confidential. Not even JeAnne can know. It has to do with the sale of the shares. It was a demand from Mr. Ares.

I don't like lying to JeAnne. Of course, I don't tell her every thought I have. All people keep secrets, even those who live a dull existence like mine. However, in this case, it is different. She knows and respects Mr. Van Lith. As for Mr. Kostanidis, we have no idea who he is. I have no doubt that when she finds out about the change, she will be worried.

I enter the dance studio, which is still empty at this hour, and look at myself reflected

in all the mirrors simultaneously. It's the only thing I don't like about this school. I feel overwhelmed by so many reflections of myself.

I spent thirteen years in boarding school, and when I see my image, I feel as if I have suddenly grown up. One day I was a little girl, the next, an adult.

In high school in Germany, every hour was like the next. I couldn't sense the passage of time. My entertainment consisted of dancing and reading.

And the dreams, a voice reminds me.

I had a lot of dreams about life here in New Orleans before I moved to boarding school. They were strange, confusing dreams, full of people with unclear faces.

I don't remember any special moments with my parents. I don't remember anything, to be honest. I am a hollow, a shell filled with the present. That's why I compulsively dedicate myself to dancing. Dancing brings me comfort and purpose. It's lucky that I'm good at the profession I chose.

No, it isn't luck, I correct myself. It's much more.

My teacher is one of the most talented dancers of all time: Debra Villatoro. Although her career was interrupted early, she is the owner of one of the most prestigious dance schools in the country. Every year, Madam Villatoro chooses a student to whom she dedicates herself exclusively, seven days a week, after regular classes. I had only been here for fifteen days when I was asked to audition.

I knew right away what that meant: she was considering me as a candidate for her undivided attention.

I'm insecure about a lot of things in life, but not about my dancing.

I was euphoric and could barely sleep the night before the final test.

I went to the theater where she had scheduled the next audition and found her with four other men, all teachers, too.

Before I started, JeAnne, who had gone with me to provide support, hugged me and said that regardless of the result, whether or not I was chosen to be trained by Madam Villatoro, it wouldn't make me a worse or better dancer. I thanked her but said I didn't want to hear those words.

For me, winning and being the best is non-negotiable.

I have no other goal in life other than ballet. I dedicate myself one hundred percent to it and accept nothing less than being excellent at what I do.

It was the second time I performed for them. The first, two days before, took place at the dance school, where they asked me to perform the classic movements: barre, center, diagonal, and on pointe.

The second performance, at the theater, was a solo, a short excerpt from the classic “The Nutcracker”. I only had to look at Madam Villatoro's face at the end to know that I had succeeded.

I smile, remembering when I had confirmation that I was her chosen one .

I am taking steps towards realizing my dreams.

I will no longer simply exist. I'm going to live. Travel and be acclaimed by the public. Transform myself into who I was made to be.

"Daydreaming, my sweet Serenity?" Madam Villatoro asks on one of the rare

occasions when she seems relaxed.

I was so distracted that I didn't realize she had entered the room.

"Aiming awake," I joke. "Dreams can come true or not, but for me, there is only one option."

One month later

"It's done, Miss Blanchet."

"What?" I ask Mr. Van Lith on the phone, even though I already know the answer.

"I am no longer your guardian. Sometime next week, Ares Kostanidis will come to visit."

"So soon? I thought it would take longer for the judge to authorize the transfer of guardianship."

He sighs on the other end of the line. "We've been negotiating for months. Due to the fact that you are of legal age and both Mr. Kostanidis and I have an unblemished reputation, the transfer was a mere formality."

Which means he lied to me. The transfer of guardianship has always been a certainty.

"You said he's coming to New Orleans. What for?"

"You need to get to know each other, but it's important that you remember what I said: no one can know about the change in your guardianship. He demanded secrecy."

"Okay about the secrecy," I say, annoyed. When he uses the word "guardianship," I



feel like a baby. "Although, I can't understand why there's so much secrecy."

It sounds like he's part of a secret society. Who on earth is this man?

I make a mental note to research him online later. I haven't yet, perhaps because, deep down, I hoped he would give up on becoming my guardian.

I feel my face heat up as I remember my appointment with a lawyer last week. I hid it from everyone. Not even JeAnne or Mr. Van Lith knew. I wanted to find out if there was any way to change my parents' will, if a judge could intervene. I left frustrated when I received a negative response.

"Is there a specific date he will come?"

"I don't know. As I told you before, sometime next week."

"I have my first solo performance in front of a paying audience next week. I mean, it's for charity, but still, very different from what I've done until now."

"Congratulations," he says, making it clear from his tone that he's not really interested. "It is likely that Mr. Kostanidis will not show up on that day."

"Does he even have my phone number?"

"Yes, he does."

"But I won't have his?"

"Not for the time being. I believe he will provide it to you when you meet."

I notice that he looks out of breath, tired, and I feel remorseful. Mr. Van Lith is very

old and should no longer bear the duty for which he was chosen.

After a quick and impersonal goodbye, which doesn't sound at all like an interchange between people who've had a relationship for more than ten years, albeit as guardian and ward, he hangs up and leaves my life.

It's stupid to be sad. He never showed me anything other than concern about doing a good job as a guardian, but even so, I feel abandoned.

One way or another, everyone I live with ends up leaving me.

The other day in my kitchen, I accidentally found some leaflets on properties for sale in Florida. I think JeAnne is thinking about retiring.

Maybe I was born to be alo

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm*

Ares

### CHAPTER SIX

"I thought we handled everything when we went to New Orleans. What the hell are you going to do in Louisiana?" my brother Zeus asks on the phone.

"We handled almost everything. I still don't know her."

We did manage to buy the one percent of the shares we needed, in exchange for me becoming the girl's guardian until the terms of her parents' will are fulfilled.

Now my brother is free once and for all from that bastard Emerson Gordon's blackmail? \* . His bank is in our hands. We can do what my grandfather asked. We will avenge our father, and soon we will close the book on this. At least officially, of course, since the damage caused by the death of our parents, as well as the events surrounding it, shaped us into who we are today. They changed us forever.

"Have you contacted the bastard yet?" I ask.

"Not yet."

"Why the delay?"

"Odin told me that he is investigating something regarding Emerson but would soon be done. He asked me to wait, however."

"I trust our cousin, although I don't like the idea of waiting any longer," I say. "I despise Emerson. Men like him only see opportunities. He probably thought that the possibility of becoming a few billion dollars richer would make us forget all the harm his heir caused us. He's so arrogant that he didn't even consider the possibility that we might want revenge, or that that's what we were after."

"He took into account that we are businessmen," my brother says. "Which is a fact. But first and foremost, we are Kostanidou. There is not enough money in the world to buy our honor."

"Even when we break up his bank, I don't think those damn Gordons will have paid enough."

"You and Hades are the vengeful ones. I'm practical. I will stick to the promise I made. It's true that Emerson Gordon is a bastard, but he wasn't the one who destroyed our family. Destroying their centuries-old reputation seems retaliatory enough to me. Thank you for becoming the girl's new guardian. I don't think we would have solved this issue of the missing one percent if you hadn't taken the lead. Van Lith wanted someone to replace him in the role."

"I think so. Well, it's done now."

"You seem a little irritated for a change," he says sarcastically, because none of the four of us can be considered good-natured.

"Finding out that the old man lied to us until the last minute pissed me off."

Only when we were in front of the judge did I know that my ward's fortune was not limited to one percent of the Gordon Bank shares. The entire time we negotiated, Van Lith implied that those shares were all that was left of the fortune her parents left her. The truth was not even close to that. Serenity has more than ten million dollars in

investments in other well-diversified areas, from technology companies to oil.

"Better for the girl that he lied. There is never too much money. What matters to us is that there is nothing wrong with the one percent he sold us. Our lawyers have already checked. They belonged to Serenity Clementine Blanchet. It was a legitimate sale."

"I don't like being deceived."

He laughs. "Who does? Son of a bitch Van Lith, with all his English lord looks, really fooled us. He must have been desperate to be replaced in the role of guardian."

"Yes, I think so too. He dangled the one percent so we thought that was all the girl had left and that's why he was reluctant to sell to us, but what he really wanted was a replacement."

"But in the end, it doesn't change anything for you."

"Of course it does. Her known wealth has increased considerably, which means there will be even more bastards around her, trying to seduce her, wanting a slice of that fortune."

"Have you seen her?"

"Just a photograph from when she was a child. He didn't provide me with any others, and I haven't done any research on her."

"I wouldn't want to be in your place."

"Thanks for the words of encouragement, asshole."

He laughs. I have to admit that Zeus has become less sullen since Madison entered

my older brother's life. "And now, what do you intend to do with the rest of her assets? We can transfer them to our bank to guarantee that they will yield the maximum interest possible."

"Yes, that's what I intend, but first I want to speak to Serenity in person. I'm wondering whether I should worry about leaving her alone in New Orleans."

"Wasn't that your initial idea?"

"It's still my idea. I wasn't cut out to babysit a teenager."

"She is already an adult."

"Are you offended because Madison is only nineteen?" I mock.

"Go fuck yourself. My wife is mature for her age."

"Of course she is. That's undeniable. And at least she has blood running through her veins and not ice, like your former female companions."

"Going to Louisiana alone?"

"Hades wants to go with me."

"He's going out more these days."

"He's hiding something, Zeus."

"How so?"

"I don't know, but he has a secret, and you can guess what it's about."

"Fuck! Will he ever be able to let go of the past?"

"I don't think so," I say. "It's like a fucking open wound. Our brother blames himself. The trip was his idea, and everything went wrong from then on."

"She shouldn't have gone. Too young, too dazzled and..."

"Annoying?"

"Yes, fucking annoying," Zeus agrees.

"He saw her as the little sister we never had and wanted to give her good memories."

"The opposite was not true. She didn't want him as a brother."

"Yes. We all knew that. Hades included."

"I need to go," says Zeus. "I'll let Christos know you're heading to New Orleans."

"Why?"

"The 'king' of the city is a good friend of our cousin."

"King?"

"Don't worry about it," he says. "I just want to make sure you two get back in one piece. I've heard rumors that there are a lot of drug cartels and the Sicilian mafia operating there. We don't need another kidnapping attempt on the family."

We grew up under threat. Our family fortune makes us a target. Over the years, we have suffered several kidnapping attempts, all of which failed thanks to the skills of

our bodyguards.

"I'm not a baby. You and I are just a few years apart."

"I don't care how old you or the other boys are. I will always worry about the three of you."

\* ? This plot from book one is not relevant to the current book and is mentioned here solely for context.



Serenity

### CHAPTER SEVEN

#### NEW ORLEANS

Without knowing exactly why, I end up not researching my new guardian. It might be reckless, since I'm in the hands of a stranger now, but it's also a form of denial, I think.

In any case, I thank God that the man didn't decide to show up this week. The stress of debuting my solo performance for paying guests has affected my sleep and appetite over the last few days.

All the money will go to charity, and tickets, at five thousand dollars each, are sold out.

I hear a noise behind me, and I turn, feeling my heart take a gentle leap. Part of the dressing room is in shadow, a clothes rack positioned there, and it gives me a somewhat sinister impression.

I shake my head, thinking I'm a fool.

Of course, it's my nervousness about the premiere heightening my senses and making me see things that don't exist. That is the only possible explanation for the feeling I've had of being watched everywhere I've gone since moving back to New Orleans.

Unable to control myself, I look back towards the clothes rack, and just like when I was a child and imagined there was a monster under my bed, I feel a shiver of fear.

Stop it, Serenity! I say to myself. Go over there and put an end to this stupid fear once and for all.

I take two steps towards the shadows in the dressing room, telling myself that I'm not a coward, but suddenly I feel like two pieces of clothing are moving, as if there's a sudden gust of wind.

Except there can't be. There are no windows here, and the room is heated.

My God, what is happening to me? I know that outside I have the security guards designated by the Greek taking care of me. They accompany me wherever I go without the slightest embarrassment.

Mr. Van Lith sent me a warning about them, which only made me even more upset with this man, Ares Kostanidis. He puts me under surveillance and doesn't even bother to talk to me about it?

I got a shock when I went to the University of New Orleans campus and suddenly noticed three giants following me at a close distance, as if I were some kind of celebrity.

I had to go to college this week to enroll. Before returning to the United States, I applied for a performing arts course. Not because I was particularly interested in pursuing the profession but because I imagined that was what my parents would have expected of me: that I go to college.

After a few days with Madam Villatoro, however, I realized that it would be impossible to combine a university course with studying professional ballet.

And then, I realized that if I forced myself to do that, I would be failing to live my dreams to fulfill others' dreams, even if those “others” were my deceased parents.

It was the first adult decision that I can remember making. I chose to dedicate myself to ballet without distractions.

I hear two knocks on the door, and seconds later, without waiting for a response, my mentor enters.

"You need to stretch a little more," she says, and her voice sounds rough, but I know it's because she's tense too. At first, I was intimidated by her, but I soon understood that it wasn't personal. She has a powerful voice, which contrasts with the small and delicate body that our profession requires.

From behind, anyone could confuse the two of us. We have the same physical build and abundant, wavy brown hair, and neither of us are tall.

Unlike me, however, who most of the time fluctuates between introspection and a compassion acquired through the excellent education I received, she can be quite frightening at times.

I've seen dance school teachers tremble at just one look from her.

I'm about to open my mouth to tell her that if I move one more muscle before going on stage, they will possibly explode inside my skin, as I strictly followed all the orders she gave me for today. However, I only need to look at her to realize that she is waiting for this: the rebellion, the revolt against the hard training.

“Complaining about pain is for the weak,” she often says. “Those who aim for excellence have to get used to pain, to make sure they are on the right path.”

I swallow the words of protest. I'm not here to argue—I'm here to be the best—so I head towards the door, following her, without saying anything.

Before leaving the dressing room, however, I take one last look back at the sinister rack that scared me seconds ago.

There is nothing there , I tell myself. Why would anyone come after you, you fool? Most people barely know you exist.

For now.

They don't know me yet, but soon my name will be known worldwide.

Smiling and feeling more confident, I follow my mentor.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm*

The Evil

### CHAPTER EIGHT

I like to observe.

Although I'm not very patient, no one can deny that Serenity Clementine is a delightful little thing to behold. It's a shame that for now I can't do anything but look.

I saw her scared face inside the dressing room, and for a moment, I thought she would be brave enough to come to me.

What would I have done then?

I would have had to create a plan B, and that goes against my nature, as I don't like improvisation.

No, I need to be more careful. I can't fail. I know I'll only have one chance. Even more so now, with those damn new bodyguards.

She has always been watched. The old man kept her protected after she returned to the United States permanently, but they were normal security guards. Easy to deceive.

The ones she has now look more like soldiers guarding a queen.

And isn't that what Serenity is? A queen?

I smile, shaking my head and thinking about the irony of the situation. The spider stuck in its own web. No matter why I got close to her, now I want her whole. Not just her money.

I look forward to seeing her performance. I've been to her dance school before, and I know she dances beautifully. No one who sees her can imagine how lonely she is. Dancing like a fairy, Serenity displays a confidence in herself that I know isn't real.

Deep down, she is nothing more than a sad, abandoned girl.

But that will end. I will make her mine, and then I will meet all her needs.

I look around and notice that the audience is silent, expectant.

Me too. I can't wait for the moment when I no longer have to just look at her. I want to touch her, tear away her innocence, keep her as my private slave.

A ballerina for private performances.

I close my eyes and have to place my hands in my lap to hide an erection as I imagine her dancing naked for me.

The fantasy is pleasant but unsatisfying, so I think of her naked but also with red welts from my belt on her back and legs.

Yes, that's better.

I hope she isn't docile. I hope she's a fighter, because I really want to break her.

I sigh as my body is overcome by the need that has always been in me to cause pain.

I just scrapped the previous plan. I won't kill her after a few months. I will keep her with me forever. A fairy with broken wings.

A sweet girl who's never even lived.

However, for everything to work out, I need to be patient.

Ares

### CHAPTER NINE

#### NEW ORLEANS

"Are you sure you don't want to go to the show?" I ask, much more to try to understand what is behind Hades coming with me to Louisiana than because I believe for even a second that he might be interested in classical ballet.

I certainly wouldn't be attending if it wasn't necessary for me to talk to my ward. My weeks have been so fucking busy, and I couldn't put off my visit to Serenity any longer. Unfortunately for me, it happens to be the day she's going to perform her first solo as a dancer, according to what Van Lith told me on the phone.

Apparently, even after passing her guardianship over to me—the word guardian really bothers me, since she's not a minor but an adult—he continues to keep an eye on her.

Maybe he's worried about men harassing her? I have no idea. Either way, it's not happening. The bodyguards I assigned to protect her assured me that she does nothing other than dedicate herself to ballet.

The only people she interacts with are other dancers within the dance school or teachers.

A good girl, it seems, whose life is as interesting as watching grass grow.



"Yes, you'll have to go to your torture session alone," he finally responds. "In fact, why don't you just wait until after the performance to see her? You could meet her tomorrow, even."

I don't have an exact answer for this, other than the fact that something very similar to guilt has been echoing inside me for days.

I should have come earlier. It is my legal duty to look after her wellbeing, and all I have done so far, by assigning men to be her bodyguards, is look after her physical security.

Today, I want to learn a little about the universe my ward is part of. It doesn't matter that Serenity is just business for me—I should have gotten in touch sooner.

"You won't be able to distract me," I tell him.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"What are you really doing in New Orleans, Hades? Because I don't buy this story that you were just worried about me. You know perfectly well who is in charge of this city. Christos and Zeus told Beau I was coming. I'm not taking any risks here."

As far as I can tell from conversations with Christos and Odin, right now New Orleans is a melting pot of criminal organizations working behind the scenes. However, there is a king whom all mafias obey without blinking: Beau Carmouche-LeBlanc, Christos's friend, who has an unknown past. Almost a ghost, he appears out of nowhere when necessary.

All four of us Kostanidou pay bodyguards a fortune to protect us, but within New York, our territory, we are a kind of royalty too. Here, we are guests, so Zeus took every precaution to ensure that nothing would happen to us on this visit.

"I like the south of the country," he says.

"You hate anywhere that isn't Manhattan or our island home in Greece, so try again."

"Focus on your own problems, Ares."

"Your problems are mine too. They concern all of us."

One corner of his mouth lifts as he shrugs. "If you believe that, I won't contradict you, but the opposite is not true. I don't want to share the guardianship of a teenage ballerina."

"Adult."

"Only legally, right? Because as far as we know, she knows nothing about life."

"She has been well-behaved since she left boarding school. In fact, I thought the girl would be dazzled by her newfound freedom, but that wasn't the case." The driver parks in front of the theater, and I say goodbye. "I gotta go."

I get out of the car, as the driver we hired will take my brother wherever he wants to go. As soon as I step onto the sidewalk, I'm surrounded by bodyguards. There are a dozen and a half accompanying us, and I don't doubt that, a short distance away, there are some of Beau's men as well.

I'm not heading towards the theater yet. I watch the car drive away with my younger brother inside, sure that Hades is hiding something from me.

For two years, he has lived for his revenge. Distraught, seeking retaliation.

Do not misunderstand me. I'm all for retribution when someone crosses me or

meddles in my business. The difference is that I need a single accurate blow. I am objective when my intention is to destroy; my brother, however, seems immersed in a descent of infinite resentment.

And guilt, a voice warns.

Yes, there is a lot of guilt behind his obsession. In Hades' mind, he was the one responsible for the fateful unfolding of those events.

I disagree, but he's never listened to us, and I don't think he'll start now.

He is trapped in a web of hate, and I doubt that even when he achieves what he wants, he will have peace.

I start walking towards the theater entrance, and I'm vaguely aware that my security guards are attracting attention, but I don't feel uncomfortable. I'm more than used to having them as a barrier.

I don't like people very much. In fact, I despise a large part of the world, and I have no doubt that even if I weren't who I am, I would find a way to always have someone shielding me from unwanted conversations.

I notice the head of my bodyguards come forward and show the tickets, mine and those of the entire team, to the security guard at the door. The man's expression changes instantly, and I know why. I bought an entire box, and my donation to the event is equivalent to the annual income of a large part of the American middle-class population.

In seconds, we are inside the theater. There is no one left, other than a few employees, outside. I'm always punctual, but I was late on purpose to avoid meeting the crowd that's in attendance.

In a few minutes, I arrive at my box. The lights are off, and the audience is silent, watching the performance on stage.

I settle into the armchair, preparing to see my ward in person for the first time.

Serenity

### CHAPTER TEN

Minute before

The anxiety over the premiere disappears.

As I wait for the curtains to open for my first solo performance, all I feel is peace. Finally, one of my dreams is coming true.

I don't have many, but the ones I allow myself to desire are the reason I get up every morning.

Today is my trial by fire. In just a few weeks at Madam Villatoro's dance school, I've achieved what many professional dancers spend their entire lives striving for.

There is no room for failure. I need perfection tonight.

I noticed, throughout the week, how the other dancers looked at me—with a mixture of spite and anger—but what they don't know is that I don't care about their judgment.

I even heard two of my professional colleagues whispering in the bathroom that I bought a place at our prestigious school, which anyone who's even met Madam Villatoro knows is not only a lie but absurd. Madam has a reputation in the dance world for being extremely picky in her choice of pupils. She has even refused a

princess, whose father, king of a small European monarchy, wanted to buy the place for his girl with gold bars.

I force myself to clear my mind of anything other than my performance. It doesn't matter what they think of me. I know how I've dedicated myself to this. Madam told me the day before yesterday that everyone who stands out carries a target on their back.

Success is uncomfortable, she told me, because it makes people look at their own navel and realize that they are not evolving.

I don't know if that's true. I'm not worried about what other dancers think. I don't worry about whether one or all of them achieve success; I focus only on how I will get there.

I flex my feet one last time before the curtains open, and I feel a stab of pain. If I take off my shoes, I know what I'll see: swollen, calloused toes from hours and hours of practice. Despite being my bridge to achieving the stardom I dream of, my feet are not a part of my body that I like. In fact, they embarrass me. It's one of the reasons I never go to the pool or beach, not at home, not even in swimming classes at boarding school.

I begged my guardian to negotiate in high school so that ballet could be defined as my sport, getting rid of anything that would force me to be barefoot in front of other students or teachers.

Sometimes my feet hurt even when I'm lying down to sleep. They throb from daily effort, but I never complain.

Ballet is my choice, my life.

Right now, they throb, but who cares? Dreams are never free. I'm willing to pay any price for mine.

Besides, I'm used to the pain. There is something pleasurable about it.

I feel my face heat up when I think about it. It sounds a little twisted to take pleasure in pain, and I don't understand why I feel this way, just that this is how I am.

When fellow children whined or fussed about a fall, I got up and carried on. When they cried about receiving vaccines, I watched the needle go in and didn't understand the reason for the distress.

I've thought about this a lot, and after I became an adult, I came to the conclusion that experiencing pain means I can feel, and if I can feel, I'm alive.

As I always do before starting a performance, I tune out everything around me.

I'm one step away from making my entrance, and my blood boils, excitement spreading through every one of my cells.

I hear the buzz from the audience, and I know the theater is packed. The whole place vibrates with energy.

I promised myself that I would keep tonight in my memory, but the thrill of my debut is so great that the next thing I know, I'm hovering on the stage, my entire body filled with adrenaline.

When did the music start? What did I feel when I found the audience waiting for me? I couldn't say.

My blood pumps, and I see flashes of faces staring at me from the seated crowd, but I

focus my attention mostly on myself.

I've reached the state of ecstasy I always dive into while dancing.

There is no one else, just me and the orchestra.

With my performance almost completed, I smile, and it's one of the few real ones I've smiled in years.

Happiness. The purest happiness is what I'm feeling right now, because I know I haven't disappointed Madam. I haven't disappointed myself.

Cambré, balancé, échappé. ? \*

I execute each movement exquisitely, with the respect it deserves.

And finally, it comes to an end.

My heart swells inside my chest. Exhilaration and joy like I've never felt bring tears to my eyes, and there's a smile in me so spontaneous that I don't know if I'll ever be able to stop it.

The audience rises and gives me a standing ovation.

I scan them, automatically looking for JeAnne, but then I remember she's not here. She caught a cold and didn't want to take the risk of infecting people.

I push away the sadness and begin my révérence, curtsying to the audience.

And then, my attention is drawn to one of the boxes, to the left, a little above the main audience level.



I know it's the most expensive box there is. Although it's very close to the stage, I can't see the features of its occupant, but somehow, I know he's looking directly at me and that he's just one man. I can see the outline of his suit, the rigid shoulders.

Another round of applause erupts, interrupting my curiosity. I force myself back to the present, but even after I leave the stage, I'm still thinking about the lonely observer

\* ? Ballet movements.

Ares

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

I expected to die of boredom.

I have a striking characteristic besides the cynicism and arrogance that women always make a point of throwing in my face at the end of the brief affairs I have: I hate wasting time.

Within the category of “timewasters”, I group everything that is not capable of holding my interest, and dancing is certainly included.

The moment I saw my ward on stage, however, she completely stole my attention.

I don't know shit about ballet, but I know a lot about beauty and passion. Serenity is a raw vision of the two.

As I watched her dance, I understood, for the first time, why she doesn't go out and why she doesn't seem to have any friends or even a potential boyfriend.

Serenity is already committed, immersed in an intense dedication to her art.

During the entire performance, I can't take my eyes off her. I have to force myself to remember who she is, because there is something pure and heavenly about the girl, but there is also such an intense ardor in the way she moves that I can't help imagining what all that passion would be like in bed.

Every time the thought reaches me, I push it away, trying to focus on the fact that I'm not in front of just any woman but a young orphan, someone who is unprotected and, much more than that, is my responsibility.

I don't even know what her face looks like, since in the photos I saw, she was nothing more than a teenager.

What the hell is happening? I can have any woman I want with a phone call, and my fucking dick decides to manifest itself for a girl I'm supposed to take care of?

A creature as fragile as a hummingbird?

Indifferent to my thoughts, she spins around the stage, beautiful, with perfect and precise movements. Is she aware that she is hypnotizing everyone, men and women? Yes, because there is not even a whisper in the air and the theater is relatively large.

Serenity has the audience on its delicate toes, and I don't like being part of that group.

I force myself to look away from the stage and reach for my phone inside my blazer. I quickly scroll through my contact list, knowing that somewhere in it is a woman or women from New Orleans that I've dated in the past.

I find three names with the local area code. I try to remember who they are, but I can't.

Randomly, my finger hovers over someone called "Sebia". The name is familiar to me.

Is she a model I dated?

I wrack my memory, but I can't remember anything. I'm thirty-four years old. I've had

countless partners, so it's not unusual that I don't even remember their faces, but how is it possible that I don't remember anything ? A conversation, a laugh, or at least how I felt when I had her?

No, I don't remember anything at all. I have a huge list of contacts that represents a huge void, and I like it that way.

Today, however, I know that one random woman won't be enough.

The moment this certainty hits me, the performance comes to an end.

I keep my finger suspended over the phone's display, but I focus back on the stage, and at this exact moment, Serenity looks in my direction.

It's not a blind head turn. She looks at me.

I can't see much of her face, just that she's smiling.

I'm not so stupid as to think she's smiling at me. Serenity has the confident expression of a winner. From what I've found out, today was her first solo performance, and she knows she did it perfectly.

Her head spins, refocusing on the audience.

I look at her, a little irritated. I want to snap my fingers and tell the lights to come on. No, I want to order her to be brought to me, to give me her undivided attention, like a spoiled fucking king who has his every wish met.

My arrogance wants to prohibit her from looking away from me.

I look at the phone in my hand again, knowing that I must quickly head to the

dressing room, introduce myself to Serenity, and be on my way. Maybe enjoy the night with Hades a little, like the old days, since I definitely know I won't be calling that Sebia, or the other local names in my diary.

My hand tightens around the device, my mind reacting to what I know I'm going to do.

With a hand gesture to the head of my bodyguards standing at the entrance of the box, I summon him. In a second, he is at my side. I quickly order him to reserve a restaurant that I've been to here in New Orleans and that I know is very good. Then I look for her name in the address book.

Serenity Clementine Blanchet.

I type a message.

Ares Kostanidis, your guardian, speaking. How long do you need to get ready? I'm taking you to dinner.

I decide to give her fifteen minutes to answer me. A concession to the fact that she must be being harassed by her team. After that, if there is no response, I will go and get her.

A dinner, just to make sure she's okay, and then I'll get her home safely. After that, we won't need to see each other anymore.

Serenity

### CHAPTER TWELVE

"You were magnificent," Madam Villatoro says, entering the dressing room with me.

I absorb the compliment like someone receiving a jewel directly from the hands of a queen. On the outside, I'm the picture of calm, but on the inside, I'm vibrating like a little girl in a ball pit.

I know it went well tonight, but having her validation is important to me. Mainly because Debra Villatoro is brutally honest. I've seen some dancers leave in tears because of the "truths" she tells them. Most of the time because she thinks they are not trying hard enough.

I will never die from her pushing me. It's quite the opposite. My obsession with perfection destroyed my toes.

"Thank you, madam," I say, trying not to show how happy I am, as I'm not good at sharing emotions.

Taking advantage of the fact that I'm no longer alone, I go to the clothes rack and put away the costume, like when we were looking for monsters under the bed as children. Of course, there's nothing there and I feel ridiculous.

"What is wrong?" she asks, because she's the type who doesn't let anything go.

"Nothing, Madam. I think I was a little anxious before going on stage and I thought there was someone hiding behind the clothes."

She doesn't smile. "Did you check before or just now?"

"No, just now, but I'm sure there was nothing there."

She walks to the back of the dressing room and moves the costumes even farther away than I did, giving a full view of the room. "Why did you think there was someone here, Serenity?"

I feel embarrassed. I'm acting like a baby. Madam will find me immature.

"I told you, it was just a feeling. I've always been scared," I lie.

I could never be fearful. Having been sent very young to boarding school with its long, dark hallways, I quickly learned to work through my fear.

Suddenly, she ducks as if she saw something. When she gets up again, she has a ticket in her hands. She shows me. "What is this doing here?"

I pick it up and look. "It's a ticket for today's show."

"Yes, but it shouldn't be here." She looks around the dressing room and starts opening doors. Her actions make me even more nervous.

In the end, she finds nothing, but she says, "You should talk to your bodyguards about this."

"Of course," I reply, knowing that I won't do that under any circumstances. They will definitely report to my new guardian, and all I need is one more person giving up on

me, thinking I'm a fool who needs full-time care. I will try to stay completely off Mr. Kostanidis' radar.

Someone knocks on the door, and Madam gestures for me to wait. There's something about her face that tells me she was waiting for whoever is out there.

Five minutes later, I understand why. She's just introduced me to a famous celebrity agent. The man asks me a lot of questions and seems interested in me. I don't understand the reason. I'm not an actress or a famous model. I won't bring him any profit.

Anyway, I accept his card and give him my phone number. The man is prompt, the kind of person who seems to consider every minute precious, and as quickly as he arrived, he disappears.

Madam follows him shortly after, but first she asks me if I will get home safely. I nod, and when I see her leave, I suddenly feel melancholy.

I think about my parents. If they were here, would they take me to dinner?

I shake my head at the futility of wishing for that. I will never get an answer.

I start to take off my clothes, first getting rid of my ballet shoes. There is a bathroom at the theater, but I prefer to shower at home.

I loosen my skirt and then take out all the pins holding the bun in my hair. I moan with pleasure when I finally feel the tension release.

Someone knocks on the door, and being sure it's Madam Villatoro again, because the bodyguards would intercept anyone else, I invite her in.



I have my back turned, but I say to her, "I decided to take a shower at home. My feet need a hot tub with lots of bath salts, Madam Villat..." I turn around smiling, but then my voice disappears.

It's not Madam Villatoro who is standing in the doorway. It's a tall, strong man, dressed in an elegant suit.

An intense shiver runs through my body, because I'm sure, somehow, that it's the same person who was watching me from the box.

I would like him to come into the light a little, his face is partially covered.

I don't remember that I'm just wearing a leotard and tights. I don't even remember that I should send him out, because after all, he is a stranger. Instead, I step forward, recklessly, getting too close to the unexpected visitor.

The first thing I notice is his square face. He is unshaven, and a desire to feel that roughness in the palm of my hand makes me close my fists to resist the temptation. His lips are full, but they form a straight line with not a hint of a smile or friendliness.

His nose, which could belong to a sculpture that's almost perfect, is slightly bent at the top. It doesn't harm his beauty—on the contrary, it makes him even more attractive.

His hair is short and very dark, but it's his midnight blue eyes that keep me captivated.

They are what draw me even closer.

I open my mouth to try to suck in some air, feeling my entire body filled with a heat I've never felt before. It's as if my skin pulses, vibrating just from his gaze.

I force myself to try to say something. He must think I'm an idiot.

Before I can form a sentence, however, he says, "Why didn't you respond to my message? I don't like wasting time, girl."

Girl.

That sounds my alarm bells. It's like he already knows me.

"What?"

"I'm Ares Kostanidis. I texted you that I would take you to dinner."

"I . . ."

Confused, I try to process the information, but I can't think of anything other than the fact that I'm half-naked in front of my guardian.

A wave of heat warms my cheeks, as if all the blood in my body has flowed there. "I didn't check my phone, sir. If you can give me five minutes, I'll be ready to go."

"You didn't seem to be in a hurry when you approached me. Is this how you behave around strangers? Because if that's the case, I'll have to increase the number of bodyguards, Serenity. You are a danger to yourself."

Ares

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She doesn't back down after what I say, and it takes me a fraction of a second to understand my mistake.

Serenity may have the fragile appearance of a hummingbird, but her wings are made of steel.

For much less, just the tone of my voice has made some men tremble. I have no intention of frightening her, but despite being struck by her beauty, I am, first and foremost, her guardian, and now I won't be able to stop thinking about whether she's being careless.

She's practically naked, and I could be anyone.

Unable to stop myself, my eyes roam over her perfect body. Delicate but deliciously sensual. Small breasts, narrow hips, waist so tiny I could circle it with my two hands.

Shit. What am I doing?

I look at her confused face and thank God for her innocence. She wouldn't want to know what I'm thinking right now.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Kostanidis." She seems to be recovering. "I haven't picked up my phone yet. It was on vibrate, and my teacher came to talk to me after the

performance. I assume you came here to meet me, although the timing is . . . strange." Her voice is flat, devoid of emotion, and her eyes don't look at me. However, a half-smile tries to form when she adds, "Thank you for the invitation, but I'm not hungry."

She has the nerve to say this while holding the door as if to close it behind me.

I don't move. I look at her and am satisfied when I notice that behind the courage, there is anger.

I don't know how to deal with fragility. I was forged to never bend, and if I'm going to have to look out for Serenity in the years to come, I will mold her into someone capable of standing on her own two feet when our contract comes to an end.

We've introduced ourselves. I can leave with a clear conscience. The girl didn't order me to enter recklessly. She was expecting someone she knew. It didn't escape me that as soon as I entered, she used the word "madam".

What's more, the bodyguards would never have let a stranger pass them by.

That's not what made me angry. It was the fact that Serenity, even once she'd seen it was a man in her dressing room, a total stranger, approached me wearing so little clothing.

The photo of her as a teenager doesn't do justice to her beauty. She's the type that would make heads turn as she passes by on the street.

A petty side of me is pleased that she doesn't leave the house much, and I push the selfish thought to the back of my mind. "Did you think that what I sent was an invitation?" I ask, even though I know I should leave.

She shudders almost imperceptibly and, instead of answering me, goes to a rack

where a bag is hanging. Without saying a word, she takes out her phone.

I should give her space to get dressed, force her to get dressed, but Serenity doesn't seem concerned about her semi- nudity and I can only imagine it's because she either likes to tease or she's too innocent to understand the danger of being that close to a man.

My gaze slides over the rounded curve of her firm ass. Large, compared to her build. Her hair is so long it almost covers it. A full and perfect ass for...

Fuck me. I'm completely insane. It's the only explanation.

"Get dressed. I'll wait for you outside."

To my surprise, she turns to me with a wry smile—or at least what should be one but looks more like the face of an upset angel. "Yeah, it wasn't really an invitation. It was an order," she says, shaking the phone she is holding. "Still, I'll have to decline, Mr. Kostanidis."

"Dress for dinner with me, Serenity. Don't try to challenge me. I have seven years to make your life hell if I want to."

Her beautiful eyes, already naturally large in proportion to her face, widen even more. "You didn't even bother to give me your phone number through my old guardian, and then you show up and say you can make my life hell? Why? You've already made it clear that you don't want contact. Please know that it's reciprocal."

She's right, I was wrong, but I'm still determined to take her to dinner because I'm a controlling jerk who doesn't like being contradicted.

"I don't intend to give you trouble," she continues. "I just want to dance. You won't

even hear from me for the next few years."

"I believe you, but I wanted to meet you. You're right to say I should have come sooner," I grant her. "My mistake, Miss Blanchet. I'm trying to fix it."

I smile at her like I do when I want a woman to give in to me. I know it's not fair, as she's very inexperienced, but I never said I played fair.

I can see the gears in her brain turning and also the exact moment she will say yes.

I reach for a switch near the door, because only indirect light brightens the room.

There are two reasons why I do this: I want to see her better and I want to break the atmosphere of intimacy in the small space.

"Are you going to be a good, obedient girl, Serenity?" Now, I can admire her beauty and also the way her cheeks blush intensely.

She nods. "Yes, Mr. Kostani?—"

"Just call me Ares. You have five minutes to get ready. I've already given in too much. Don't get used to it."

I walk out and close the door behind me without giving her time to argue.

It would be a waste of time for both of us. I always win.

Serenity

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I'll be late, I'm sure.

After he leaves, I lock the door, even though I know Ares won't come in again. On the contrary, he seemed angry that I continued to look at him even though I was wearing so little clothing; I'm still trying to understand what possessed me not to run and put on my robe.

Maybe he's a bit of a wizard. Yes, that's it. The evil Greek sorcerer mesmerized me.

You are crazy, Serenity Blanchet, I scold myself.

Why in heaven was I so aggressive, telling him I wasn't going to dinner with him? I need Ares to be my ally, not my enemy. For seven years, since I don't plan on getting married until after I'm twenty-five, he will be responsible for my money. It's stupid to confront him like I did.

I think of his name and try to remember Greek mythology classes.

Ares, the god of war. In fact, if I remember correctly, the Olympian god of wild war, bloodthirsty, slaughter personified.

Yes, I think it fits. Even though at the end of our conversation he tried to appear cool, the aggression is latent in him. However, it doesn't make me feel afraid. It sends an

inexplicable shiver throughout my body.

Clear your mind, Serenity. He is your guardian, and a very angry guardian.

Very handsome too , a little devil whispers in my ear.

My phone vibrates with a message.

Unknown number: Move. You have three minutes.

Me: How do you know I'm not ready yet?

I save his number in my contacts, and seconds later, a new message arrives.

Ares: Because you seem like a thinker, girl. I'm a man of action. Get dressed, or I'll come in there again and pick out your outfit.

Me: That is not your role as guardian, Ares.

Ares: I don't follow rules. I create them. It won't take much to make you understand that.

I drop the phone on the vanity counter, feeling my whole body shake with excitement. I take off the rest of my clothes faster than I've ever done in my life, and without worrying about putting on a bra, I pull the black dress I wore to the theater over my head.

I look in the mirror and grimace at the heavy makeup I wore for the performance, but I don't have time to take it off, so running my fingers through my hair to untangle it, I get ready to leave.



I throw all my clothes into the huge bag I brought, except for the skirt I wore on stage, making a mental note to tell Madam Villatoro that I left it here.

I push my ballet shoes, which from today onwards have been promoted to “lucky” ones, to the bottom of my bag as best I can, and then my hand bumps into a piece of paper. I pull it out and see it's the ticket that Madam found and gave me to keep.

I look back at the rack, and a chill—nothing at all like the excitement of meeting my guardian—reaches the back of my neck.

For a moment, I consider talking to Ares about it, but then I dismiss the idea. I don't want him to think I'm a baby the first time we meet. The huge number of bodyguards watching me is enough.

"You're late," he says as soon as he sees me.

"Sir—"

“No ‘sir,’” he corrects me.

" You change your mood very quickly."

"On the contrary, Serenity. It's always the same."

So he manipulated me into giving in. Is that what he's saying between the lines?

"Are you hungry?"

I'm starving, but there's not much I can eat at this time of night if I want to avoid gaining weight. "Not very," I lie.

He watches me as if he knows I'm lying, and I feel my face heat up. The curse of having fair skin.

"You're hungry," he says, and I shrug.

"I can't eat at this hour."

"What?"

"I don't eat anything more than a few olives at this hour. That will be my dinner."

His features change again, his jaw tightening in irritation. "Today you are going to have dinner. After the energy you've expended, you need food."

He won't let me argue. He puts his hand on the back of my neck and guides me to the exit.

The part of my neck he touches heats as if a hot iron has scorched it, and I wonder if he can tell how I'm shaking. I could ask him to let go of me, but I won't do that. Even though it's stupid, I like my guardian's touch.

He doesn't hold me loosely; it's like being trapped in the claw of a beast.

I smile at the foolish thought, and when I look to the side, I realize that he seems indifferent to me.

Stupid.

Ares is fulfilling his role, just as Mr. Van Lith did. Don't embarrass yourself, Serenity.

I barely even noticed getting into the car. Ares doesn't say anything else until we arrive at a restaurant that looks like an old mansion.

Even though I returned to New Orleans a few months ago, I don't know anything about the city. I'm like a tourist in the place where I was born.

Like a gentleman, he helps me out of the car, and my stupid heart skips a beat because I can't repress the thought that this is the first time I've gone out with a guy.

Not some guy . My guardian. A real man.

A hostess guides us to a table in a deserted part of the restaurant.

"How old are you?" I ask after we sit down.

"I thought you studied at an elite school. Didn't they teach you that it's not polite to ask people their age?"

"Is it a sensitive subject for you?" I ask, unable to stop myself. In fact, I kind of already know the answer. Ares doesn't seem to be bothered by age. Or by anything else, I guess. He is the embodiment of self-confidence.

"Thirty-four," he says.

Sixteen years older, I calculate quickly.

"I could be your father," he continues, in a serious voice, and I'm mortified that he realized I was doing math. I pray he doesn't understand the reason for these stupid calculations.

"A very old man," I say, coughing and hiding a smile to direct the conversation to

something other than my humiliation.

It's not like I've never seen a handsome man in my life. In fact, I've even flirted with some. But none that come close to him.

And then, an idea occurs to me. He must be married.

I run my eyes over his hands, looking for a ring, but when I look at his face again, I feel like dying.

He saw it.

Jesus, could You make the ground open up and swallow me?

"I'm not married," he says, without concern for my embarrassment, "but let's make something clear: I'm your guardian, not someone you're dating. I want your obedience, not to be your first crush. And even if it weren't like that, and I didn't have any responsibility towards you, I don't date girls. Believe me, you wouldn't be able to handle me, even if our roles were different."

Serenity

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I was putting a small piece of breaded okra in my mouth, which the waiter brought immediately after we sat down as an appetizer. Every time I came home from boarding school for the holidays, JeAnne made them for me, and I think I kind of got hooked on them. I could never resist, although afterwards I would run at least ten kilometers on the treadmill to burn off the calories.

After what Ares says, however, I stop the movement midway.

"What did you say?" I ask, shocked that he's the equivalent of a human juggernaut and yet able to read me so well.

"You heard me. I'm not here to be your first crush but to make sure you're okay and also to make sure you'll call on me if necessary."

"I would never date someone so old," I say, because I've just discovered that I have a vengeful streak.

Bastard.

Of course, he is partly right. Not about me wanting him to be my first whatever, but because it would be like winning the lottery if it happened. Especially because Ares lives in New York. Dating him wouldn't even interfere with my ballet practice. Once every fifteen days would be enough and . . . No, every fifteen days would be too little.

He is very handsome. Once every week.

"Return to Earth, Serenity. You're daydreaming. I saw the way you looked at me, so stop with the I'm-too-old act because I'm not buying it."

"I believe that a man in your position would have women throwing themselves at his feet, Mr. Kostanidis, but with me, you will be safe. My heart already belongs to someone else."

Guys, I've never invented a lie so quickly in my life. I broke all the records. I almost pat myself on the back when I see his expression stiffen.

But it doesn't last long. Soon, a smile of pure irony appears on his beautiful mouth. "You're lying. You don't leave the house except to practice ballet."

Think fast, Serenity.

"You're right. And that's because I'm not interested in anything else that I can't do with my Otis," I say quickly, remembering the brother of a friend from boarding school. "He's four years older than me, and he's still studying. He's finishing college, but next vacation, he'll come visit me."

"I want his full name."

"What?"

"You heard me. Full name."

"No way. He comes from a noble family, I can assure you. Besides, I can take care of myself."

"What you think is beside the point. I'm your guardian. I want to know who the boy is."

Oh my God. I'm going to have to call Otis and ask him to confirm my lie. Incredibly, I'm better friends with him than I am with his sister.

"Okay," I say and see his eyebrow rise.

"That easy?"

"Do you want me to start a war over everything? As you pointed out, I'm a good girl. A young dancer with a brilliant career ahead of me and a handsome boyfriend."

I look at him to try to see how my words affected him, but it only takes me a moment to feel like an idiot. Ares' expression remains neutral, obviously.

He negotiated to take over my guardianship. He's not worried about my private life.

"And a millionaire."

I just took a sip of water, so I choke. "What?"

His expression denotes confusion. "What do you mean?"

"I thought I heard you say I'm a millionaire."

"That's what I said."

"How is that possible?"

"Wait, Van Lith never talked to you about the fortune you inherited?"

I feel like an idiot, ignorant. "I never asked."

"It wasn't your place to ask; it was his place to tell you as soon as you turned eighteen. There is a lot at stake. Your future, mainly." He looks angry now. Not in the same way as when he was angry with me—he looks really angry, and it strikes me that his name fits him like a glove. I wouldn't want to get on his bad side. He's not explosive. He's frighteningly cold, much worse than if he yelled.

"What do you mean my future is at stake?"

"You're a smart girl, Serenity. Think."

"I swear I don't understand."

"You're beautiful," he begins, and I get angry as I feel my stupid heart race, because he says it in a clinical way, not as a compliment. "But if that beauty comes in a nice million-dollar package, it becomes much more attractive."

"Oh!"

Ares

Jesus, I want to squeeze Van Lith's neck right now.

She looks at me in complete confusion, and more than ever, I feel like a creep for having ogled her like I would any woman who caught my interest.

Serenity is not just eighteen years old; she is a sweet angel in every way.

"How serious is your relationship with this Otis guy?"



"What?"

"Don't answer with another question. It won't work."

She gives a nervous laugh. "Otis's family has a lot more money than I will ever have. Did you say millions of dollars in my account? Think of his, but somewhere in the billions. Now, could you explain a little about this fortune you told me about?" she asks, as if she expects me to say at any moment that the claim is a big joke.

Half an hour later, when I finish explaining what her inheritance entails, as well as the way I intend to invest it, she is whiter than the tablecloth.

"Eat."

"I don't know if I can."

"Yes, you can. The performance combined with the tension that preceded it probably prevented you from eating properly before."

"Are you a father?"

"No."

"You're acting like one."

"My role is to take care of?—"

"So that I don't fall into the clutches of a scoundrel. I understand, Ares, but I'm not a baby."

"No, you're not," I say, swallowing hard as I watch her bring a piece of peppered

cheese to her mouth.

"I have a boyfriend. One who won't want to steal my fortune." She says it like she doesn't give a shit about money.

"Do you intend to marry him?"

"I never intend to get married. You'll have to put up with me for seven whole years, Mr. Kostanidis. But don't worry. I won't bother you. The only thing I need is to set up a dance studio at home. I meant to call you and ask for it, but now that I know I'm not on the brink of destitution, I don't think you'll deny me."

"You can have anything you want, Serenity."

"No one can have everything they want, Ares."

"What does that mean?"

"All the money you say I have is not capable of bringing my family back."

Serenity

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two years later

PARIS

"You should tell him, Serenity," Debra says, as she watches me put the finishing touches on my makeup.

"No," I answer without looking at her, continuing to paint my eyes. From the night of my first solo performance, two years ago, I decided to take the task upon myself. Makeup artists always put on too much, and I feel heavy with so much mascara.

"You're not thinking straight. Take advantage of the fact that you will be spending the next few months in the United States."

"I'm already tense just knowing that he and I will live in the same city. If I tell Ares about my stalker, he won't let me breathe, Debra."

I've been calling Madam Villatoro that for a long time. She went from mentor to dear friend, even making my beloved JeAnne jealous. I love them both, but my nanny doesn't accept sharing me with the little one with the nose up high, as she calls Villatoro.

"He's been much better than we imagined at first," she says, and I know she's right.

After that one dinner with Ares, we never met in person again. He never suggested it, and although I would like to see him again, I am too proud to ask him for such attention.

At every performance, however, no matter where in the world I am, I receive a bouquet of three dozen calla lilies—my favorite flowers—and a piece of jewelry.

I don't know how he found out about my taste in flowers. I probably mentioned it in an interview I gave.

I always thank him by message. I know he is doing it out of obligation and also, in a way, investing my fortune by buying me the jewelry.

I've never even opened the boxes. I don't give a damn about gold or diamonds.

Over the last two years, some things have changed in my life. The most drastic of them is that I have become a professional and that I'm about to become the prima ballerina of the New York City Ballet. But even before I reach my dream peak, I'm already acclaimed worldwide as the new global phenomenon of classical ballet. Before I received the invitation to the New York City Ballet, I was asked to join the Bolshoi, but since I intend to take JeAnne with me wherever I go, I wouldn't force her to go that far.

The retirement plans I thought she had have apparently been shelved for now. She never brought it up with me, and I never told her that I found the brochures about properties in Florida. Everyone has a right to their secrets.

I have lots of them. Currently, the only person I can say knows everything about my life is Debra. I hide nothing from her, including the overwhelming attraction I felt for my guardian the only night he came to see me.

It's not that I don't trust JeAnne enough to share that with her. I do. I love her like a mother, but sometimes I have the feeling that she still sees me as a baby.

So Debra has become my confidant, and that's precisely why she's upsetting me now.

"Haven't you ever watched police documentaries?" she asks.

"What?"

"I'm talking specifically about stalkers, Serenity. Stalkers who pick a target and fixate on them because they think they're destined to be together, or whatever crazy reason they tell themselves."

"It's been two years since that ticket you found, Debra. Nothing serious has happened since then."

"True, but still, that person—and I'm going to assume here that it's a man—wants you to know he's nearby. The recurring tickets, the single rose that appears out of nowhere in your dressing room. These are all clues that he is around you. Aren't you afraid?"

"A little, but honestly, I don't think he means me harm. Maybe he's just a fan. A very rich one, to follow me around the world."

"Or a really crazy one. And careful, right? Because he's never left DNA on his 'gifts' or gotten caught on camera."

I know she had the tickets tested and they didn't find anything. "I appreciate your concern, Debra, and I promise I will think about it, but I won't become a prisoner of fear. Besides, what could Ares do?"

"Are you kidding me? We looked him up together! The Kostanidou are a kind of royalty in the United States."

"I know. Let's do it like this: When I get to New Orleans to organize the move to New York, I'll call Ares."

"Don't think I'll forget that promise, Serenity. I complied with your request not to tell security about the flowers and notes, but something tells me that your stalker is becoming increasingly impatient."

"Impatient for what?"

"To meet you face to face."

A shiver of fear raises the hairs on the back of my neck. "I don't want to talk about it anymore. I'm going on stage in a few minutes. I need to concentrate."

"You're like a younger sister to me, Serenity Clementine. I won't let you get hurt."

Serenity

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Fifteen days later

### NEW ORLEANS

"Hey, stranger. Forget to call your boyfriend?"

"I just disembarked. Do you have some kind of radar to find me, Otis?"

After I got home from dinner with Ares that night, to avoid worse embarrassment in the future, I decided to call my boarding roommate's brother. With great shame, I explained the situation. He and I had a special connection the first time we met, and it was like that on other occasions too. We never dated, but we became good friends when he came to visit Matilda, his sister a year younger than me.

I don't even know how I got his phone number in my contact list—I don't remember saving it—but when I found it, I sighed in relief, because I had no doubt that Ares would find out about Otis in a heartbeat.

From what my roommate said, her brother was very naughty and didn't ever have serious relationships, so I was aware that I was asking him for a huge favor.

To this day, I can't understand what possessed me to invent that lie. I wanted to save my dignity, pretend that my first thought when I met my guardian wasn't taboo, and I

ended up getting into a lot of trouble.

As it turned out, our relationship as co-conspirators made us real friends. Otis shows up at my performance venues without any warning, and he always takes me out to dinner afterwards. I even allowed him to kiss me on one of those occasions. The press had been portraying us as a couple for a long time.

Who knows, maybe the lie could actually become a real relationship? That's what I thought.

Unfortunately, I didn't feel anything. While Ares made my body shiver just by holding the back of my neck, Otis couldn't do the same with his tongue inside my mouth.

I see him as a brother, and I wanted to release him from the agreement after a few months, but he told me that he doesn't care, and that having the “taken man” label protects him from a lot of problems.

He must be discreet when going out with women, because everyone believes that I am his official girlfriend. Although, based on the number of partners he tells me he has, they must surely think I'm a naïve fool.

"I'll be in the States in a few weeks."

"God, am I going to be betrayed here too?" I say dramatically.

"Maybe I'm going to ask you to marry me. So we can share your fortune and live life like there's no tomorrow."

"You already live like there's no tomorrow, dear boyfriend."



"Yeah, well, I forgot I'm rich too," he jokes. In fact, my naughty friend is the new CEO of his father's company, even though he's only twenty-five.

"Seriously, what are you going to do here?"

"Maybe help with your move."

I roll my eyes, even though he can't see me. Otis is the type who won't wash a glass, let alone do any manual labor. "Don't worry about it," I say as I get into the car where the driver was waiting for me with the door open. "Ares emailed me the details of everything he organized. JeAnne won't even have to unpack a box."

"How is she taking it all?"

"Much better than I thought. I didn't think she'd come with me. I was prepared to help her retire if that was what she wanted. I'm sure Ares wouldn't object to me giving her generous compensation for all these years."

"But you would be alone."

"Nope. I have Debra and you."

"And your guardian."

"No. He sees me the same way Mr. Van Lith did."

"But you call him Ares."

"Are you jealous, boyfriend?"

"What difference would it make? I'm rich and handsome, but I don't have his

experience, judging by the number of partners he's had."

My mood sours. I don't like hearing about that kind of thing. I never search for Ares on the internet because I'm a believer in the saying "the one who seeks finds." He's not mine at all, but in a crazy way, I feel possessive and would hate to see him with a woman.

"The pot calling the kettle black, in this case, boyfriend."

"What does that mean?"

I roll up the partition window between me and the driver so he can't hear what I'm going to say. "You can't say anything about Ares possibly being a womanizer, Otis. If we were really dating, I would practically be a frog, I'd be so green with jealousy."

I hope he will laugh, but that's not what happens. Instead, he says, "If you were mine, why would I want another, Serenity?"

I feel embarrassed. His tone seems serious, and I don't want to go down that road. Day by day, he becomes more important in my life. A constant presence.

"You almost got me, Otis. For a moment, I thought you were going to declare eternal love to me."

Finally, his laugh comes, and I breathe a sigh of relief. "Almost a perfect impression, wasn't it? Well, I need to go. One of us has to do some actual work."

"You're telling me that? I doubt you could survive even one training session with Debra."

"I doubt it, too!" He laughs, and that's one of the things I love most about my friend:

his ability to make fun of himself. "I love you, Serenity."

"Love you too. Try not to betray me too much."

"No more than necessary."

I hang up the phone and close my eyes, then slide my phone into my bag. But the moment my hand enters the bag, I feel a sting on my fingertip.

First, I think I've cut myself on some sharp object, but then I start to feel the area throbbing and a tingling sensation. It starts to become difficult to breathe.

I knock on the partition, desperately, and when my eyes start to feel heavy, I finally remember to roll down the window.

"Help me. Something bit me. Please . . ."

And then, I can no longer stay awake. Darkness engulfs me, even though the sun still shines outside.

Ares

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

#### NEW YORK - SIN NIGHTCLUB

"Are you sure everything is ready for Serenity's arrival?" I ask my new assistant, sitting across from me at my desk in SIN's office.

"Yes, Mr. Kostanidis. Everything is exactly as ordered."

"And the setting up of her dance studio?"

"Still in progress, but they assured me it will be ready five days before Miss Blanchet lands in New York."

"You'll put her on one of our planes. I don't want her on a regular flight."

"Regarding that, Mr. Kostanidis, your..." He pauses, as everyone usually does when they speak to me about Serenity. No one knows how to define her in my life, not even my brothers. "Your ward said she prefers a commercial flight."

"No, she will come on my plane."

Two years have passed since I became responsible for her, and during all that time, I have remained relatively at a distance—or at least that's what everyone thinks. Yes, I gave her the freedom to grow, ensuring that Serenity would have everything she

needed, but I was never really far away.

From the moment I dropped her off at home after taking her to dinner, that long-ago night in New Orleans, I understood the purest concept of the word “obsession”. That's what she became to me. The more I tried to neutralize it in my bloodstream, the more it seemed to burrow under my skin.

For two years, I watched her grow, blossom. She became what she was destined to be: a successful dancer, and not just any dancer, but one who moves audiences around the world.

During those two years, her relationship with that brat Otis Schulz solidified.

I turned his life upside down and couldn't find anything discreditable about the boy. He comes from a good family, as Serenity herself had already told me, he is even richer than her, and above all, which is the most important thing for me: he seems absolutely devoted to my... protégé .

I feel my jaw tighten, as it always does when I think about this, even though I know I made the right decision in never giving in to my desire for her. I would have destroyed her if I had taken her to bed, and that's what would have happened if I'd stayed around her.

I know myself.

I wanted her before I could even see her face. I wanted her voraciously in that little dressing room at the theater in New Orleans. I fantasized about her perfect body beneath mine, her legs around my waist as I sank inside her.

I forbade myself from having her, however. Serenity was young . . . She still is very young and vulnerable. She deserves someone who'll lay the world at her feet, and I'm

not that person. Just as I believe will be the case with Hades, I don't intend to get married, and it takes just one look at the girl's innocent face to understand that, for her, only the complete package will be good enough.

It doesn't matter that she told me she doesn't intend to get married either—women like Serenity deserve a fairy tale.

I can give her a dirty fuck, make her scream with pleasure riding my dick, but I can't give her anything other than good sex, and in the end, when I got tired of her, which I eventually would, she would be wrecked.

In the twenty-four months since I became her guardian, my family's revenge against the Gordons finally came to fruition. My parents' names were avenged.

Yes, my parents .

Both of them, because nothing we thought we knew about my mother's story was true. Emerson Gordon was never anything but a lying bastard, and in the end he got the punishment he deserved.

Zeus and Dionysus are married now—my older brother to Madison, the former dancer, and Dionysus to the former nanny of Joseph, my nephew.

I think about those couples and wonder if, for us, the Kostanidou, simple will ever be an option. Even though both my brothers are now happy with their wives, they went through hell before reaching the pot of gold at the end of the fucking rainbow.

"And the bodyguards I requested?" I ask.

For the first time since the meeting started, my new assistant, Elmer, looks at me in confusion. He's only been with me for three months, and initially, I thought we

wouldn't work well together. He is methodical and lives life like he's wearing blinders. Anything that deviates even a millimeter from what he's planned leaves him lost.

I soon realized, however, that he has a greater than normal ability to adapt. He's a geek, certainly, but he's good at what he does, and although I know that plan B takes him out of his comfort zone, he has managed to perform his duties competently.

"I thought Miss Blanchet already had a team to protect her."

"We talked about this last week, Elmer."

He coughs, and I know the reason. I called him by his first name. Fuck me if the kid doesn't think he was born into royalty.

"Yes, I know, but I thought?—"

"Let's get something straight: when it comes to Serenity, don't think. That role is mine . I want her safe, and if you haven't noticed yet, my desire is not a request, it's an order . If it is necessary to hire an entire army to protect her, it will be done."

I hear two knocks on the door, and without the secretary announcing them, Hades and Dionysus enter.

I gesture with my head for Elmer to leave, and once he shuts the door behind him, I stand up to greet my brothers.

Hades has been visiting more often, even though he is still full of secrets, mysterious and dark. Dionysus, on the other hand, only comes when he wants to discuss something serious, as he doesn't want to anger his fiery redhead by coming home late at night. Cici, his wife, seems sweet as a pot of honey, but she has a hell of a temper

and is one of the few people I've seen to date with the courage to stand up to my brother.

"A visit?" I ask, directing my question to Dionysus. "Bored with married life?"

He doesn't tell me to fuck off, as he normally would. Dionysus is completely dominated by his wife, crazy about her, and he has no problem in admitting it.

Neither of them says anything, and it only takes a few seconds for me to understand that something is wrong.

"What the hell is happening?" I ask, already standing.

"Your cell phone is turned off."

"No, it—" I pick up the device and see that the battery is dead.

Shit!

"What's wrong?" I ask, because I know they're not bringing me good news.

"Serenity."

I feel my blood run cold. "What?"

"She's been hospitalized. We need to go to New Orleans."



Serenity

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Hours later

### NEW ORLEANS

I hear my phone vibrating on the side table next to the hospital bed, and when I reach out to pick it up and see who the message is from, all the numbness I've been feeling since I woke up disappears.

Ares: Don't you dare leave the hospital before I get there.

Brute. Authoritarian. Arrogant.

And yet, he makes my heart race.

How is that possible?

Is he coming to see me? Maybe I should have tried to die sooner.

Yeah, my mood is dark. Why would it be different? Someone put a scorpion inside my bag.

The message is from about four hours ago, which means he should arrive any moment.

It's already dawn.

He left everything in New York to come see me?

I reread the message three times, trying to guess what it will mean for my future.

I don't show it to Debra, who arrived from Europe a few hours ago, or even to JeAnne, whose eyes are red from crying. She has hugged and kissed me so many times to make sure I'm really okay that I no longer know what to say to comfort her.

Debra convinced her to go to the hospital cafeteria to get something to eat, because she hasn't left my side for a second since she got here.

Now my mentor and I are staring at each other, and she doesn't look happy.

"If you don't tell Ares, I'll tell him myself," she says, sounding angry.

I know she was the one who told him because she told me.

I sigh and nod at the phone. "He's coming," I say.

"Serenity, you know that what's happening isn't your fault, right? Don't be fooled into thinking you did something to attract this crazy person's attention."

I nod, because I can't imagine a single reason why someone would want to hurt me.

"How could he have put the scorpion in my bag without me noticing, Debra?"

She doesn't have a chance to respond. Before I can blink, the door opens and my god of war, more beautiful than I remember, hovers in the doorway. I can see two men behind him, but I only know they are men by their height and suits. There's no way I can pay attention to another human being with Ares Kostanidis standing only a few

feet away from me.

I cannot speak. I just stare at him. I've often thought about what our reunion would be like when I finally arrived in New York, but nothing prepared me for the crazy race that my heart is running right now.

It's like I was numb for the last two years and now I've finally woken up.

It's as if fresh air fills my lungs and my pulse has found its perfect rhythm.

I've spent months thinking about why my body reacted to him the way it did on the one night we were together. I fooled myself by saying it was because I had never before been around someone so handsome or powerful, but now, when the avalanche of emotions hits me with the same intensity, I am sure that whenever I am around him, it will be like this.

Two years have passed. I've traveled, met other people—boys included, despite my false commitment to Otis. No one has ever made me feel this way. Not even close.

He wears a black suit and white dress shirt, no tie. Now I'm a little older, I notice details that previously went unnoticed, like the way his dress shirt stretches against his chest, outlining the muscles. Or how his pants emphasize his narrow hips and muscular thighs.

His hair is disheveled, and his chin is unshaven, which makes him even sexier.

"I want everyone out," he says suddenly, still looking at me. His voice sounds like thunder. He takes a step inside, and his large body seems to fill the entire room.

"Ares," one of the men accompanying him says in a warning tone, entering the room.

No one needs to introduce them to me for me to know they are his brothers. The eyes of all three are identical. Not the color specifically, but the shape . . . maybe the way of looking at people too.

There is not a drop of softness in them.

The speaker has shoulder-length hair, a beard, and square-framed glasses. The second man accompanying Ares, also very handsome, says nothing. He doesn't try to calm his brother; on the contrary, he stares at me, looking as annoyed as my guardian.

"I'm Debra Villatoro." My mentor is not intimidated and reaches out to him.

For a few seconds, Ares looks away from me and stares at her, as if deciding whether she deserves an answer or not.

He's really screwed if he ignores her. Debra doesn't bend for anyone.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Villatoro," he says, although there's no pleasure in the way he speaks.

Another thing that catches my attention is that Ares knows that she is a Mrs., not a Miss. Few people are aware of the fact that she was once married.

Why does this surprise me? Even from a distance, he has demonstrated several times that he controls every step I take. It's natural that he would know about the people around me too.

"Mr. Kostanidis, I don't think it's a good idea—" Debra begins.

"I'm really not worried about what you think. I appreciate you reaching out, but Serenity is my responsibility."

I stop myself from giving him a rude answer, because I wonder why he's so furious.

The police left here a few minutes ago, after taking my statement. Debra may have called him to tell him that I was stung by a scorpion, but I'm sure that the person who told him that I needed to give a statement, and much worse, the content of my conversation with the detectives, were the bodyguards.

She opens her mouth to retort, but I interrupt her. "You can leave us alone, Debra. I'll be fine." She is part of my life, but for the next five years, at least, Ares will be too. It makes no sense to encourage a war between the two.

My friend comes up to me and kisses me on the forehead before leaving. "I'll be in the hallway," she says.

I notice the men are going too, and a small panic attack hits me. Will I be alone with him?

Not that I was under the illusion that either of them could protect me from my guardian's wrath, but at least the one with the beard seems a little calmer—like, on a scale of zero to one hundred in anger, he might be ninety-two, while Ares and the other brother would easily exceed one hundred and fifty.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your brothers?" I ask in a desperate attempt to buy time before they leave.

He narrows his eyes, and I can see he understands my maneuver.

"I'm Dionysus, and he's Hades," the long-haired one says, and I think his mouth lifts a little in an ironic smile.

Why? Why did I have the courage to throw it in the face of his brothers that he has

“no manners”?

"All gods?" I ask, the result of the sincerest nervousness, and this time, the man's smile is real.

"Are you still doped, Serenity?" he asks.

My face boils with shame. "When I'm nervous, I say the first thing that comes to mind."

Dionysus nods. "Yes, we are all gods, but at the moment, your only concern should be this one," he says, patting Ares on the shoulder. He gently squeezes my guardian's shoulder and whispers something I can't hear.

Then he and Hades both leave, abandoning me to face what I know won't be an easy conversation.

Ares

### CHAPTER TWENTY

I've watched her on stage from the shadows these past two years, and if I had any hope that the impact of her beauty would eventually be neutralized for me, I have just realized that I was deluded. Serenity is now even more perfect than when we first met.

All traces of late adolescence are gone. She is still very young, but there is no doubt that she is a full-grown woman.

Her hair, still long, falls loosely down her back and also a little down the front of her body, creating a brown blanket, bringing back the desire to wrap my fingers around it.

I keep both hands in my pockets and force myself to concentrate on what I came here to do, even though those doll-like eyes, which at this moment show insecurity, and the mouth with full, naturally pink lips, are a fucking distraction.

When I set out to help my brother Zeus by becoming the guardian of the then orphan and aspiring ballerina, the only heir to the shares he needed, I intended to keep our relationship strictly professional for as long as my obligation lasted.

I knew we would eventually have to meet, but it only took a single visit to New Orleans for me to know that working closely together would be a bad idea.

Even if it weren't for the instant attraction I felt for her, I don't create bonds other than family ones. I didn't want a woman to take care of, or in this case, a girl.

I was protecting her from myself, from my desire for her, because whatever would happen between us wouldn't last.

All Serenity Clementine had to do was keep quiet, remain a good girl, reach the damn age stipulated in her will to take possession of her assets, and disappear from my life forever.

She wasn't supposed to take risks. She wasn't supposed to awaken the madness of an obsessive fan. But first and foremost, she wasn't supposed to hide anything from me.

I barely finish the thought before I feel like a bastard over the first two points. It's not her fault she's so beautiful and talented. Of course she won the hearts of fans around the world, and among them, hundreds must be perverts.

But she was very wrong to not tell me from the beginning that there was someone stalking her.

According to what the bodyguards who heard her testify told me, it has been happening since she returned to New Orleans from the German boarding school.

More than two fucking years ago.

Serenity also revealed to the police that the son of a bitch leaves her gifts and notes, and what goes through my mind is: how did the security guards, whose only mission on this fucking planet was to protect her, let someone who posed a risk get so close to her?

Her moving to New York left me torn. While I liked the idea of having her nearby,



there was a downside: the temptation would also be nearby.

Now, however, I am determined to keep her close to me. As much as I don't want any intimacy, because I know myself well enough to know where we'll probably end up if I give in to my desire, I'm a Kostanidis and, for now, she's mine.

No one will hurt her.

"You are mine. What in the hell was going through your head when you didn't tell me you were being stalked?"

"You never even came to see me again."

I run a hand through my hair, irritated. "So that was it? I didn't come to see you, so in retaliation, you hid something from me that could harm you or much worse?"

"Of course I didn't . . . I didn't need to call you. I have Otis!"

"And why didn't he protect you? You could be dead, Serenity." I'm not saying that to scare her; I need her to understand the gravity of the situation. But in the next moment, being who I am, I exempt her from any responsibility and put all the blame on myself. I run both hands over my face. "You are right. I shouldn't have disappeared like I did."

"You didn't disappear. You have your own life. I'm not a child. I have my own life too."

I ignore her dismissal. I failed her. Attending some of her performances around the world wasn't nearly enough. This will never happen again.

"Change of plans. You will no longer live in the apartment I assigned to you."

“What?”

“You heard me. You will live in a unit on the floor below mine. I own the entire building. The apartments are duplexes, so you will have all the comfort possible and I will be able to monitor you better.”

“Monitor me? I don’t need to be watched.”

“That’s what I thought, but here you are with scorpion venom in your bloodstream that could have been fatal.”

“But it wasn’t, Ares. I am fine.” Despite what she says, her lower lip trembles.

I’m not a sensitive guy—on the contrary, I’m a heartless bastard—but seeing her weakened puts something close to an iron ball in my stomach. “This is not a debate. You will move wherever I determine, Serenity.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“I will send an army after you. Or better yet, I will go on every trip you take.”

“You wouldn’t have time. You are a businessman and I’m a dancer. We have separate lives.”

“I just need a cell phone and a notebook, girl. Don’t test me. Don’t think you can win a wrestling match with me. You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but I shake my head.

I have never felt so divided in my life. I want to strangle her and at the same time pull her to me and protect her. I want to turn her over on her stomach and spank her ass

for keeping such a serious secret from me for so long, and also swear to her that everything will be okay.

I want to lock her in a fucking tower, where only I can visit her, but also tell her to fight, not allow a sick person to steal her life.

I decide on a middle ground.

“You can argue all you want, Serenity. Until we catch whoever tried to hurt you, you will be under supervision.”

“I have shows coming up. Are you telling me you’ll follow me around the world?”

“Your next few shows are all here in the United States. I have your agenda,” I say, revealing a little of my obsession. “But, yes, when you go to other countries, I will go too.” In fact, I’ve only just made up my mind about it, but she doesn’t need to know that.

“You won’t be able to.”

“What?”

“You said you only need a notebook and a cell phone, but that’s not true. I read the papers, Ares. You own SIN nightclub and go there every night.”

Serenity

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I want to swallow every word as soon as I finish speaking, but I realize it's too late as I face Ares' look of astonishment and then anger.

"What did you say?"

I'm very intimidated, but I'm also upset. I cannot say that I was deceived in relation to my guardian. In the only face-to-face contact we've had, he's made it clear that he's controlling and arrogant, but even so, arriving here like the god of the universe saying that I'm going to have to change my plans and move into his building is a bit extreme, even for him.

I almost apologize.

Almost.

But I realize I have an advantage, if his surprised expression is any clue.

A few months ago, an article appeared about a secret nightclub called SIN, which was frequented by authority figures from all over the world. There wasn't much detail in the article, other than the fact that it allegedly belonged to Ares Kostanidis, the heir to one of the most powerful banking families in the world, and also that the place was only accessible to the elite of the elite.

I don't know what happened next, but suddenly, all news about it disappeared from the planet's websites. How do I know this? Because I checked. I don't want to know about my guardian's love life, but I was curious about his professional life. Unfortunately, I remain in ignorance, as I have no idea what SIN represents. But a place called “sin” makes the imagination run wild.

And what kind of sin are we talking about?

If I, a virgin, had my interest piqued, I can't imagine what happened to men and women in the United States. I don't doubt that they now have a waiting list for members.

Yes, members , like a kind of club, according to the report.

"Serenity, answer my question."

"You heard me." I pause because I know that what I'm about to say will poke the bear. "Uncle Ares."

" Uncle Ares?"

To my disappointment, he doesn't seem affronted, only amused.

"You want to treat me like a baby. I'm acting accordingly."

" Uncle Ares. " he repeats. "Yeah, maybe that title works." Without saying a word, he goes to the door and locks it.

I should feel scared, but that's not what happens. I trust my heart, and it tells me that if there is anyone in the world with whom I will always be safe, it is my guardian.

"What are you doing?" I ask when he starts walking towards where I am.

He doesn't answer. He sits on the bed and, with a quick movement, pulls me face down onto his lap. He slaps my ass over my thin hospital gown.

Then he puts me back on the bed.

"Why did you do that?" I ask, my voice sounding out of tune, the result of a confusion of emotions so intense that I can't even begin to understand them.

I can still feel his huge palm against my skin. He didn't hit hard. It stung, but it wasn't the sensation of the spanking that made my body react, it was the dominant way in which he caught me.

Dominant?

God, where did I get that from? What do I know about dominance?

"You called me uncle. I thought that would be how an uncle would react when faced with a disobedient niece."

"Just because I asked about the club?"

"SIN is none of your business."

"So it exists?"

"We are not here to talk about me but about your safety."

"I think this staying in my life thing is a two-way street, unc—" I clear my throat.

"Ares."

"Wasn't one spanking enough?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You were going to call me uncle again, cheeky."

"Aren't you tired? It's dawn." I try to deflect to see if he forgets the subject. I'm afraid to open my mouth and say I want more spankings. I could lie and say I hated it, but will he believe me?

No, he won't. From the way he looks at me now, with a mix of curiosity and confusion, maybe he knows exactly what his unexpected spanking did to my body.

"What did the doctor say?" Thank God he changes the subject.

"Haven't you spoken to him yet?"

"No. I wanted to see you first."

I suddenly realize what he did. He took a plane in the middle of the night to make sure I was okay.

"Because you're my guardian?"

"Because as long as you're in my care, you're mine."

"Otis might disagree with that," I tease, and only Jesus would be able to explain why I just said such nonsense.

"Otis is a boy. You need a man to protect you. You have me, and I won't let whoever did this come close again. Which hand was it?"

I show him the left one, where I can still see the scorpion sting on my fingertip. "There is no way this creature could have come with me from Paris. Either it was in the car, or they put it in my bag at the airport."

He still hasn't let go of my hand. In fact, despite looking at me, his thumb runs across my palm. I don't know if he realizes what he's doing, but I do, and my heart beats like it's about to have a heart attack.

I remember what he said to me the night we had dinner two years ago:

"I want your obedience, not to be your first crush. And even if it weren't like that, I don't date girls. Believe me, you wouldn't be able to handle me, even if our roles were different."

"I have a counterproposal," I say.

He lets go of my hand immediately. "In relation to what?"

"Your watching my every move until the man harassing me is captured."

"Do you think you are in a position to negotiate?"

"No, but I'm going to die trying. I don't want our coexistence to be a living hell, so I think we can come to an agreement."



Serenity

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"What kind of agreement?" he sounds suspicious, but at least he's listening to me.

I just decided I want to know more about him. Not just in his role as a guardian but as a man too. "For every order you give me, I have the right to a request."

"The answer is no if it means you taking risks, Serenity."

"I won't, I promise. But I want to have space to maneuver."

"Please enlighten me as to what that would entail."

"I don't know exactly right now, but I swear I won't ask for anything that would be embarrassing for you, anything illegal, and much less anything that would put me at risk."

"I could force you to obey me anyway, without coming to any agreement with you."

"I'm starting to make money as a professional. I've been invited for interviews and even to represent a famous perfume brand. You'd be surprised if I told you how much they're willing to pay me. I could give up my fortune, and then do whatever I like, including get into trouble. Our contract would be void, but something tells me you like total control, Ares. You don't want to look back in a few years and remember that you failed me."

His eyes flash with fury, and I suspect it's because he's not used to being challenged, but by his expression, I also know I've hit the nail on the head.

"What do you want?"

"I want you to be my friend, first and foremost."

"No. I'm your guardian. Friends do not owe each other obedience."

"I'm an adult, Ares."

"Really? I hadn't noticed. Your irresponsible behavior says otherwise. I want you to tell me everything about the stalker, which, by the way, you should have done a long time ago."

I look down at my hands resting on the sheets. I turn my palm up, focusing once again on the scorpion's tiny sting. "Think it might be a fan?" I ask.

"Who else would it be? You don't leave the house; you have few friends. Unless.. ."

"Unless what?"

"It's an enemy of your boyfriend."

"No. My . . . uh . . . relationship with Otis only started to get more serious after my debut as a soloist."

"After the night we had dinner, you mean." He looks at me as if he can read my mind and knows all my lies and sins. I don't have a long list of sins to my name, but as for lies...Jesus!

"Yes, that's right."

"In any case, I will have him investigated."

"Haven't you done that already?"

"No. I followed up on the information you gave me, and it checked out, but as you have barely seen each other in the last two years, I didn't think it necessary to go deeper."

"Not everyone has time to go out every night. Otis and I have a great relationship but separate lives."

"Platonic?"

"What?"

"You understood me, Serenity."

For a few seconds, I really don't understand, then I feel as if lava from a volcano is burning me from the inside. He's asking me if we've had sex yet?

I look at him to make sure that's what he meant, but when I see the shadow of a sardonic smile, anger overcomes embarrassment. "No, not platonic. When he visits me, we don't leave the hotel, if you know what I mean."

He will never be sure if I'm telling the truth. Otis always rents the room next to mine with a connecting door between us, although we've never used it because I always lock mine from my side, but at least I can pretend I'm not that inexperienced.

When I see that the ironic face has turned into a frown, I feel satisfied.

"Tell me about the stalker."

"That night you came to see me at the theater, I thought there was someone in my dressing room."

"What?"

"Behind the coat rack."

"And why didn't you tell your bodyguards?"

"I thought I was going crazy. I had only been out of boarding school for a few months, and I believed I was jumping to conclusions, as everything was new to me. But..."

"What?"

"Notes started appearing and sometimes a single red rose, no matter where in the world I was."

He paces from side to side, like a caged beast, and even though the memories of the times I've felt scared still make me anxious today, I can't take my eyes off my guardian. For all his arrogance and bad temper, Ares is a sight to behold. "Swear you'll never hide something like this from me again, Serenity," he says, coming close and holding my chin.

"I swear. I didn't want to worry you for nothing."

"For nothing? You just told me that you've been stalked for two years, and you think it's no big deal?"

"I know. I was a fool. Debra has fought with me several times about this."

"Who else knows?"

"Just her and JeAnne. I didn't even tell Otis."

"Or me."

"I didn't plan to."

"Why?"

I shake my head, not wanting to speak.

"Tell me."

"I don't want you to feel sorry for me."

"I just spanked your ass after you were stung by a scorpion. Believe me when I say I'm not the type to feel sorry, Serenity."

"Are you a sadist, then?"

Oh my God! Why did I ask that?

To my surprise, lines of laughter form around his eyes, although he tries to hide it.  
"I've never thought about it, but I don't think so. Causing pain doesn't give me pleasure."

"What does?"

He looks at me with such intensity that I shiver. It's as if an invisible bond has formed between us. Then, his expression returns to neutral. "This conversation is inappropriate."

"I said I want to be your friend."

"And I never said I would agree to that. Now, tell me why you didn't say anything about this stalker before."

"Because I've gotten used to being alone, mainly. I was sent to boarding school when I was five, Ares. You learn to deal with your fears on your own."

Ares

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"Are you telling me that the scorpion that stung her was genetically modified?" Christos asks on the video call with my family, looking as shocked as I was when the head of the medical team treating her raised this possibility.

Our return to New York had to be postponed. Only Dionysus returned, but Hades remains with me.

To my surprise, before being released from the hospital, Serenity made a request of me: she wants to sell the house in which she was born. She told me that even if she returns to New Orleans one day, she doesn't intend to live there anymore.

I, of course, questioned why. It's the last link she has with her dead parents. My brothers and I still keep the house my parents owned on our island in Greece to this day, for purely sentimental reasons, as we rarely go there. Everyone now has their own island. Maybe, with the birth of my nephews and with Zeus and Dionysus married, that will change.

Serenity's response was logical, and sad too. She said the childhood home she remembers is boarding school. All her memories are limited to JeAnne and the school in Germany. She knows who her parents were and told me that sometimes she dreams of scenes from her childhood, but nothing is clear, as if she's watching an old movie, without either of them present. Loose pieces of memory.

So, instead of a temporary move, leaving most of her things in Louisiana, I will have everything she wants to keep sent to her apartment in Manhattan.

"We're not sure yet," I finally reply, "but the doctor thinks that's the only possible explanation."

"Why does he think that?" Zeus asks.

"Because the scorpion that stung Serenity was a *Tityus Serrulatus* . A lethal species, also known as the Brazilian yellow scorpion. It can cause death between one and six hours after the bite."

"But that's not what happened."

"No, and that's why he suspected the genetic change. The doctor said he read about a case like this once, a long time ago, but it was a spider. It was sent to kill a political leader right here in Louisiana. But in that incident, the spider had its genetics transmuted to increase its action potential. He studied the case at school, and when he saw the animal that bit Serenity, he recognized it immediately and knew that if she had really been exposed to the full potency of the poison..."

I can't finish. I don't consider myself a particularly sensitive guy, but it makes me crazy to think that a girl so young could lose her life through an act of stupid insanity.

"She wouldn't have survived," Odin says, filling in what I couldn't say.

"What do we do?" my older brother asks, and despite all the shit that's happening, I smile. If there is one certainty under heaven, it is that among us, one person's problem is everyone's problem.

"Have her stay with me, first of all," I answer and see Christos's eyebrow reach his



forehead.

I know the reason. I am the most detached of the four brothers. The concept of family for me is strong—after all, I'm Greek—but outside of it, I have several acquaintances, nothing more than that. I am not responsible for any other living being besides myself.

"Serenity is mine, for now. I aborted the plan to send her to the apartment I had initially chosen."

They all nod in agreement, and I know that in my place, they would do the same. What I don't say is that since the night I took her to dinner two years ago, my ward went from being an obligation to becoming an obsession. One that I combat on a daily basis.

"I will investigate," Odin says, which doesn't surprise me. He's not a good person to have as an enemy, especially if you're someone who keeps secrets.

"The only thing I don't understand is: if Serenity is right, and he's been hiding in her dressing room since the first time she performed here in Louisiana two years ago, how could the son of a bitch have gotten in without the bodyguards catching him? I say.

My cousin shrugs. "Luck. Or maybe he studied the place before going in. If she had told us at the time, it would have been easier to access the camera footage. It wouldn't have taken me more than a few minutes, no matter where in the world it happened."

"Do you hear yourself?" Dionysus asks. "That is fucking scary."

"It's practical. Technology is my weapon. Anyone who crosses me is the enemy. If you have nothing to hide, you don't need to be afraid of me."

"Mr. Kostanidis, can I talk to you for a minute?"

I just left the library at Serenity's house.

"Yes?" I respond, already knowing who is speaking to me. Debra is with Serenity, talking about her performance at the New York dance school. With everything that's going on, I didn't have time to congratulate my ward on being chosen as prima ballerina, although I sent her jewelry and flowers as soon as I found out. The only person left is the nanny, the woman named JeAnne who Serenity treats with the same affection as she would a relative.

It doesn't go unnoticed by me that she looks sick, very thin, and when we met at the hospital, her eyes were red from crying.

I'm not moved by other people's drama, but I admire those who can give unconditional love to people who don't share their blood, as is the case with Eleanor, my sister-in-law Madison's stepmother, and apparently, Serenity's nanny is the same way.

From what I've been able to find out so far, JeAnne has dedicated her entire life to taking care of my ward.

"What do you want, ma'am?"

"I want to talk to you, sir. I'm sick," she says, without preamble, confirming what I already suspected. "But I don't want Serenity to know . . . yet. I would really like to go with you to New York tomorrow, but I can't."

"Do you need something?"

"No. The salary you pay me is more than generous, as is the health insurance—first-

class. The only thing I want to ask of you, actually beg of you, is to take care of her."

"That is my intention."

She gives me another nod. "Yes, I believe you, but I'm not just talking about her safety. Serenity grew up alone at that school. She has an immense ability to withdraw into herself. All the discipline she maintains, like eating little, sleeping for as long as she decides, and the endless hours she spends practicing ballet...I worry that it's a kind of defense she's created. She protects herself from living by pretending that she is living."

"What do you mean?"

"Ballet is her safe place. She doesn't risk going a step further. She's twenty years old, but she hasn't lived yet."

"And what about Otis?"

Instead of responding immediately, her lips form a thin line.

"Madam?"

"He's just a boy. Nice but spoiled. He isn't good enough for her. Serenity doesn't love him, if you ask me. What I'm asking, and I don't even know if I have the right, is that you make sure she lives a little. That's within your role as a guardian, right?"

I don't know what to say, so I change the subject. "Why don't you come to New York with us? If you are sick, I can make sure you have the best treatment possible."

"I am fine. Just tired. She is starting a new life. Fulfilling her biggest dream, which is to become the prima ballerina of that dance company. The time has come for her to

walk alone

Ares

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The next day

In a few hours, we will board a flight back to New York. Our private plane is already on the tarmac waiting, but before we go, we have a meeting. In fact, I was surprised that he hadn't gotten in touch before, since he's a friend of Christos.

Hades and I get out of the car at what appears to be an old mansion. The property is immense, almost a small city, and guarded as well as a fortress.

We barely take a few steps and the main door opens. There's a man standing there, and although I can't see his face because it's against the light, I know who he is: Beau Carmouche-LeBlanc, whom my brother Zeus calls the "King" of New Orleans.

According to Christos, a needle doesn't fall on the ground in the city without his knowledge.

He finally starts walking towards us, but I'm surprised when Hades steps forward and greets him. That's when I'm sure my suspicions are correct. My little brother is keeping secrets from us, and they involve Serenity's town.

"You must be Ares," Beau says, giving me the confirmation I needed that he's met Hades before.

“Yes,” I respond, accepting the hand he offers me. I don’t know what I expected. Some kind of mobster, perhaps? Those types romanticized by Hollywood?

The man in front of me looks like a businessman, like so many others I’ve met. Like us, he exudes wealth, but there is nothing in his features that shows he is dangerous, which, from what I know of his life so far, gives me the assurance that he is.

I’m not naïve.

Men like Beau and Odin fly under the radar. Father, husband, cousin, uncle. A respected family man and businessman. If you just look at the surface, that’s what you’ll find, but there are many layers beneath.

“How is your ward?” he asks, without any explanation of how he knows about Serenity.

“Out of danger. Flying with me to New York in a few hours.”

He nods. “Shall we go inside?”

We start walking alongside him and soon reach the hall. There is a woman kneeling on the floor, collecting toys—rubber ducks and balls—indicating that he has children.

“I’m sorry about that,” she says, but as she starts to stand up, Beau steps forward to help her.

I observe the dynamic between the two. The man’s expression instantly softens as he looks at who I assume is his wife.

“Thank you,” she says, smiling, as if he is her sunshine. When she finally lifts her eyes to look at us, I’m stunned for a few seconds by their color. They are yellow.

“They are not contact lenses.” She smiles wider, as if she understands my surprise. “Nice to meet you. I’m Amber Carmouche-LeBlanc.” Like her husband, she offers her hand to shake, and I almost smile at the way Beau watches us when we touch his wife.

Like a passionate and possessive guardian.

She leaves then, and he directs us to a library. Before he closes the door, we hear children laughing.

“How many?” I ask.

“Four. Two sets of twins.” Again, his expression softens, but it soon becomes serious again. “I’m investigating the incident,” he says.

“How?” I ask, understanding immediately that he is talking about the attack on Serenity.

“I requested the camera footage from the airport, at all establishments.”

Only then do I understand why Zeus calls him King of New Orleans. The police told our lawyers that it would take months before they were all accessed. I knew Odin wouldn’t wait that long—if I know my cousin, he’s already working on it—but I’m fucking surprised by the speed and efficiency with which Beau acted.

“My men are analyzing the footage, but it could take a few weeks, I’m told.”

“Thanks.”

“She doesn’t need to leave out of fear, Ares. I didn’t know the girl would arrive that day, but I had already intended to keep an eye on her because Miss Blanchet is yours.

Tell her that any time she wants to return to New Orleans, she will be protected. No one will dare lift a finger against her in my city from today onwards if they want to keep breathing.”

Serenity

“You can’t go to New York with me because you have a sick relative? Who?” I ask, trying not to show sadness and pushing the feeling of abandonment into a dark room inside me.

JeAnne has always made sure I had at least an idea of home, always waiting for me with my favorite foods when I returned from vacation. Putting up trees at Christmas and sending cards and gifts on my birthday.

She lived so much for me that sometimes I forget she has a life of her own. I vaguely know that her parents are dead and that she never had any children, but nothing more than that.

“A distant cousin. I never talk about her,” she says, and I get the feeling she’s lying.

I think about the brochures of houses in Florida that I once came across, but I quickly dismiss the idea. She doesn’t look like she’s going to start a life somewhere else. On the contrary, she looks fragile in a way I’ve never seen before.

“Why did you only tell me that today?”

“With the whole scorpion story, I ended up forgetting.” She’s lying again. I would bet my arm that nothing she’s told me today is true.

“But will you meet me in New York when she gets better?”



“Yes, I will,” she says, without looking me in the eye, and I feel my chest tighten.

However, I’ve spent a lot of time practicing hiding my emotions and never showing that I need other people. “All good. If you need anything—anything at all—will you contact me?”

“Don’t worry, my child. I’ll be fine.”

I’m very shaken. She waited until the last moment to tell me that she wouldn’t move to New York with me, and although she’s promised to move later, I don’t believe her anymore. In my heart, I think this is a goodbye, and the feeling intensifies when she pulls something out of the pocket of the dress she’s wearing. It’s a photograph of the two of us when I was still a child.

I remember it, although not when we took it. I took her with me to Germany and kissed her every night before bed.

“You’re not coming,” I say, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from crying.

“To live, no. But I really want to see Manhattan. You’re a woman now, Serenity. You don’t need me.”

I hold myself back from telling her that I really do need her, that I always will. Instead, I look away from her face and give her a weak smile.

JeAnne, and now Debra too, are my only family. Even Otis will get married one day, and then we won’t be able to see each other so often anymore.

I haven’t told him about the scorpion incident, and I need to, even though he’s already arranged to meet me in New York in a few weeks.

“Will you let me know when you arrive?” she asks.

I nod and let her hug me.

I couldn't say how the rest of the farewell went. I vaguely remember Ares guiding me to the car, and then we got on a private plane.

I choose a seat away from him and Hades. I need to be alone for a while to think.

Serenity

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“You should have called me,” Otis says over the phone.

“What for? Anyway, it all happened so quickly.”

“It has nothing to do with this dating I, Serenity, but with our friendship. I care about you.”

“I’m fine, Otis. And as for our dating . . . I think it’s best we stop here.” I feel like a secret agent, talking in code. I don’t want the Kostanidou to hear me.

“Are you serious? You want to break up with me over the phone?”

Despite everything, I can still smile. “Don’t be an idiot. I have a reputation to maintain. I’m tired of getting cheated on.”

“I never did”—he pauses and laughs—“in public.”

“I didn’t expect you to be celibate, but I’m releasing you now.”

I notice a shadow hovering over me, and when I open my eyes, I realize it’s Ares. He doesn’t even pretend he’s not listening to the conversation, and I pray he only caught the end of it. Him finding out that the dating was fake would be too embarrassing.

Looking back, I wonder why I proposed such a thing. I was really childish to think that Ares would care whether or not I had someone. He has already made it very clear that he sees me as a child.

I purposely keep talking to Otis for another minute, and he tells me he's no longer sure if he'll come to the United States. I wonder if it's because I said I wanted to stop the fake relationship, but I quickly dismiss the idea. He is handsome and rich. If he adds "single" to the label, he will become irresistible.

I finally end the call, and without ceremony, Ares sits in front of me.

"Trouble in paradise?" he asks.

"Were you listening to my conversation?"

"Just the part where you said you didn't expect him to be celibate but now you were kicking him out of your bed."

"Good God, do you think this is an appropriate conversation to have with your ward?" I try to sound angry, but the truth is he has the power to bring me back to life. I left New Orleans super depressed. Ares makes my blood boil.

"Should I treat you like a little girl? Make up your mind, Serenity: are you a girl or a woman?"

"What do you think?"

"I haven't been able to come to a conclusion yet."

"Wrong. You see me as a girl, otherwise you wouldn't have spanked my ass in the hospital."

I hear a snort of laughter, and I think he does too, because then he says, “Put on your headphones, Hades, or I’ll teach you how to fly without a parachute.”

I shake my head and can’t help but smile. “There are four of you, right?”

He nods.

“What’s it like to have brothers?”

“A pain in the ass, most of the time.”

“And are your parents still alive?”

For the first time since we’ve met, he looks away. “Both dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You went through the same thing and survived, Serenity. Human beings are adaptable.”

“Yeah, I know.”

I get up, excusing myself. I don’t want to talk about this.

I walk to the back of the plane, trying to find the bathroom, but I end up opening a bedroom door. I try to turn around to leave, but before I can do so, he grabs my arm.

“Did I say the wrong thing?” Instead of going back to the main cabin, he makes me enter the suite, closes the door, and leans against it.

“I’m tired of adapting. I’ve done it my whole life. I learned to pretend at five, the day

they dropped me off at that school.”

“Serenity . . .”

“How old were you when your parents died?”

“I was already an adult.”

I wrap my arms around my body to stop the tremors. I don’t want to break down in front of him, but between being admitted to the hospital for the attempt on my life and saying goodbye to JeAnne, I’m feeling fragile.

“What do you think is better?” I ask. “Not remembering your parents, as if they never existed, or suffering from a conscious loss?”

“Come here, Serenity.”

I shake my head and take a step back. “I don’t want your pity. I just asked you a question.”

He comes closer. “I don’t feel sorry for people. I wasn’t kidding when I said that. But it’s certainly not pity that I’m feeling right now.”

My legs soften. “Is it anger?” I keep walking backwards, not because I want to run away but because instinct tells me he’s a predator, and I like the idea of being hunted.

In just two steps, he is on me. His huge arm wraps around my waist, and I can feel every muscle in his body. “Don’t play with me. You won’t like the consequences.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He slaps me on the butt, and to my shame, instead of screaming, I moan with my eyes closed.

“Damn, Serenity!” Ares lets go of me and takes a step back.

This time, I’m the one moving forward. “What did I do wrong?”

“You can’t be that naïve.”

“I’m a little girl, remember? Or will you swallow your pride and admit that—” I stop talking when his hand cups my chin.

“What will I admit?”

“Will you have the courage to admit that I am a woman and that you want to kiss me? I would let you if you tried.”

Ares

Jesus!

I’ve never needed to work on self-control as hard as I do now. I feel the sweat wetting the back of my neck, I’m trying so hard not to pick her up and lay her on that bed.

How we went from a wistful conversation about the past to my dick being hard as steel I will never be able to understand, and this is the reassurance I need that I was right to stay away from her for the last two years. The attraction I feel has not diminished. Everything about Serenity provokes me, even her innocence.

I didn’t bring her to the plane suite to seduce her. I’m not a scoundrel.

“You don’t know what you’re saying. You feel sad and that’s why you think...”

I see her face turn red instantly. “Yes, that’s right,” she snaps, looking angry. “That’s why I moaned when you hit my butt again today. Because I’m confused and sad, not because my entire body was shaking and wanting more.”

After that rush of courage, she runs to the bathroom and locks herself inside, leaving me to process her words.

I didn’t use force any of the times I spanked her ass. I didn’t want to hurt her, only to show that she’s still a girl, and now she tells me she wants more?

Fuck!

I rub my hands over my face, trying to clear my mind, but it doesn’t work. So I send common sense to hell and walk to the bathroom, hunter instinct activated, but before I can reach her, I hear Hades calling me.

“I’m coming,” I yell. “Wait for me in the main cabin.”

“No. I need to talk to you now .”

I open the door, my mood gone to hell. “What do you want?”

“What do you think you are doing?” he asks.

“Serenity is none of your business.”

“No, but you are. Don’t get involved with her, Ares. She is young and very vulnerable. She’s your ward, damn it!



I want to grab him by the collar and force him to sit in his seat, but I know he's right, so I walk out and close the door behind me.

"It's not a good idea to have her in your building. Maybe we can rearrange things. Increase the number of bodyguards but send her to another property."

"No. She's not going anywhere. Serenity will stay where I can keep an eye on her."

"I hope, for your sake, that it's just an eye.

Serenity

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I spend the rest of the trip lying on the plane's bed and only get up when Hades comes to tell me that I need to go back to my seat, as we are about to land.

I can't believe I had the courage to say what I did.

My God, I don't even know how those words escaped. I've always related spanking to children, but feeling Ares' hand slapping my bottom made me need to squeeze my thighs together both times it happened.

Pretending to doze off in my seat, I feel my face heat up as I remember what happened in the suite, and I thank the heavens that I'm alone, but when I open my eyes, I come face-to-face with the sovereign of my sinful thoughts, sitting right in front of me.

"Nothing will happen between us. I apologize for touching you." His face is serious when he speaks. There is no irony, anger, or provocation; I feel my stomach sink.

I don't know what I expected to hear after what I confessed to him, but it certainly wasn't being rejected so completely.

I take a deep breath and put the fakest smile in the world on my face. "You are forgiven. Like I told you, I hated it. I was confused."

“No, you weren’t. You loved me slapping your ass as much as I enjoyed spanking it. I would have preferred it without the dress and with your panties halfway down your thighs, but even so, it made me horny to spank you. I could give you more, Serenity. I could strip you naked, lick and suck you all over. Make you come, screaming my name, as I bury myself in your sex over and over again. But when I leave, you’ll be broken. And you can be sure, no matter how beautiful you are, that I would leave.”

I swallow hard, and I can’t tell whether I feel embarrassed that he is so graphic in his explanation, excited because despite the final part, I really want to experience all of this, or angry that he is so sure that I would be just another woman to him, that I wouldn’t make him feel any different than others had before me.

“We have to live together for the next five years, Serenity. If I took you to bed, our affair would last about a week. My relationships never go beyond that. I’m experienced, and I would have no problem treating you as if nothing had happened, but I don’t think you could handle it.”

Affair .

Not a relationship, an affair .

Any sadness I was feeling disappears, replaced by a strong determination. The same determination that made me, at twenty years old, get hired as a prima ballerina at the New York City Ballet.

Silently, I swear I will make him swallow every one of those words. I won’t run the risk of falling in love. Ares is beautiful, but he’s also an ogre.

I don’t have time for boyfriends; I want fun. And in the end, if he’s right and I really can’t deal with it, I can just move away, leave. But before this year is over, I promise, Ares Kostanidis, that you will go completely crazy about me. And then, when you

beg me for more than a week, you'll understand what it feels like to be left behind.

I force myself to look at him like I'm not making a mental voodoo doll of the arrogant Greek. I maintain a peaceful expression, when in reality, inside, I am seething. "I understand, and I thank you for that, Ares. You're an honorable man. Anyone else in your situation would have taken advantage of my vulnerability. I had just broken up with Otis and was feeling needy. Perhaps, unconsciously, I was looking for a more experienced replacement."

He stares at me like he wants to pry my brain open with his fingers to prove that I'm a fake and that none of these words are true, but thank God he can't.

"Replacement?"

I think saying it out loud makes him see the absurdity of what I've just said, because he gives me a half-smile. Who in their right mind would dream of Otis when they could have Ares?

"I didn't mean to offend you."

"I'm not offended. You are lying. I heard your conversation. It was you who ended the relationship, not the boy." He practically spits out the last word.

I need to force myself not to smile. "I've always been kind of in love with him, but I don't think it would work out, so I decided to put an end to it before I end up heartbroken. Oh, and regarding what you said a moment ago, even if I were interested in being one of your 'affairs,' which I'm not, there would be no chance of leaving me 'broken,' as you stated. That could only happen if there were feelings involved on my part. I admit that you are very handsome, but you are not my type, Mr. Kostanidis."

Despite the warnings to fasten our seat belts, he leans forward, resting his elbows on

his knees. “You’re a little liar, Serenity. I believe you when you say you don’t have feelings for me, but regardless of whether you hate me for what I just told you, your body wants me. Lucky for you, I don’t intend to do anything about it.”

“And I don’t need you to. I’m in New York as planned, but I don’t intend to be locked up at home. Put an army of bodyguards around me if you want, but I’m going to enjoy life a little.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Debra said she’s going to take me to see some nightclubs. With luck, we will receive an invitation to SIN.”

“You won’t set foot there.” He seems surprised by my behavior.

Join the club—so am I. I never thought I could be so bold.

“I can take you out.”

“No, thank you. I wouldn’t want to disturb your week-long meetings.”

“I’ll take you.”

“I will let you take me, but I will consider this as an imposition on your part, which gives me the right to a request.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know yet. I don’t have much time before ballet season starts. I’m going to take the opportunity to go out at least a couple of times. Until then, I’ll think about whether I want something from you.”

He stares at me. “I’ll warn you again: don’t play with me, Serenity. You are beautiful and desirable, but as far as I know, you have only had one man in your life. You’re no match for me. I’m not a bastard. I always lay my cards on the table. But getting into a relationship with you will only bring problems for both of us.”

“Nothing has happened between us, and nothing will happen, Ares. I’m a good girl, and you’re just my bossy guardian.”

Ares

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

My good girl looks around the apartment curiously, while I, in turn, observe her.

The property I chose for her, one floor below mine, is about five hundred square meters. I have already arranged, just as Serenity did in Louisiana, and as I had ordered Elmer to do in the other property that I had previously chosen for her to live in, that a studio be installed so that she can practice her beloved ballet at home.

The duplex has four bedrooms, but now, watching Serenity's small figure move through each room, it seems too big for a young woman in her twenties and living alone.

She hasn't brought up the subject of JeAnne's withdrawal from coming to New York, which makes me think my ward is a contradiction. Young and inexperienced, but on the other hand, she seems to have learned to keep her emotions to herself.

Not all of them, a demonic voice says, invading my thoughts.

On the plane, when we were in the suite, she told me what she was feeling. If it weren't for Hades, I probably would have chased her into the small bathroom and tasted that delicious mouth.

Hell, I need to get out of here.

I'm about to tell her this when she asks, "Could you unpack my bags with me?" There is no impertinence in her tone, only insecurity.

"Why?"

"Never mind."

I walk to where she is, even though I promised myself I wouldn't. "Answer me," I command, holding her chin and forcing her to look at me.

"I'm not going to give you a reason to think I'm a brat."

"I haven't labeled you yet. I haven't decided whether you're a girl or a woman. Now, tell me the reason for this strange request."

"What if they put another animal in my luggage? Another scorpion, or perhaps a snake?"

From what little I know of Serenity, she doesn't feel comfortable showing such a vulnerable side of herself. She forces herself to be strong.

Anyone her age who had been stung by a potentially lethal scorpion would have panicked. She handled the situation well. Of course, I noticed that she felt afraid, but it was a controlled fear.

Something about this "obligation to be strong" with which she acts is moving. Like an innocent angel trying to face the world.

Without giving it a second thought, I pull her into my arms.

I don't know what her reaction will be. Serenity is unpredictable. She never says what



I think she will; she doesn't flinch when I push her buttons.

Not long ago, on the plane, she was challenging me, teasing me, but to prove once again that she was right, that I can't predict her movements, she puts her delicate arms around my back, increasing the proximity.

A controlled hug—that's what I try to give her.

Comfort. Protection.

I swear to God, there wasn't even a dirty thought in my mind when I initiated the hug.

The problem is that there is an overwhelming fucking chemistry between us, as if the girl's body emits some kind of seductive hormone that stokes my hunger and need.

We both feel the change when our bodies stiffen as we tighten our embrace.

We don't move apart, however, and only the sound of heavy breathing fills the room.

I've touched her a few times, but right now, I feel completely connected to her. I realize that this feeling could become addictive in just a few seconds.

I slide my hand, which was flat on her back, to her waist. Serenity is so small that I can reach her hips, too. The other hand, which I kept at the back of her head, tangles in the mass of brown hair, soft as strands of silk.

She lifts her face and looks at me, her huge blue eyes bright and inviting.

"I swore to myself I wouldn't do this, but I'm obsessed with tasting you."

She sucks in air sharply. "You said we shouldn't..."

"Yes, I did," I whisper, brushing my lips lightly against hers.

Serenity looks at me from beneath her eyelashes, completely secure in my arms, without realizing that she is moving her body in an unconscious and seductive dance. "Then..."

"I need that mouth more than my next breath."

I don't give her any further chance to escape; I don't touch her lips with delicacy or with the care that perhaps I should with someone as inexperienced as her. I hold her against me and devour her with the hunger I've repressed for two years, with a voracious desire that I've kept under control because I knew it would be an unfair game with her, fresh out of boarding school.

It's still an unfair game—there's a huge age difference between the two of us—but I need to know what she tastes like.

Just one taste, and I'll let her go, I swear silently.

It's a good intention, correct and even honorable, but it vanishes like paper in water the second Serenity parts her lips and allows me to feel her tongue on mine.

From then on, from the moment I taste the warmth and softness of her wet interior, any rational thought I might have had goes out the window.

The size difference between us is huge, so I lift her in my arms so that her mouth is aligned with mine. I deepen the kiss, exploring its sweetness, taking everything I want, and her hands tangle in my hair, squeezing lightly.

I separate our mouths for a moment. "Don't hold back. I know you have a lot of passion inside you."

The words seem to set her free. She not only tightens her hold on my hair but also reacts to the kiss, sucking and nibbling on my mouth.

A voice tells me we need to stop before it's too late, but I shut it up because I need more of that honey.

I hold her thighs with both hands, but just as I'm about to force her to wrap her legs around my waist, the intercom rings.

She gets scared, trying to escape my arms. Reluctantly, I lower her, but I can't stop looking at her beautiful face, flushed with excitement.

"Who could it be? One of your brothers?"

I shake my head, unable to speak, then I remember that Debra Villatoro told me she would be coming by to surprise Serenity and spend a few days with her, until she made the permanent move to New York. Apparently their friendship is much more solid than I first imagined, because the retired ballerina plans to keep an apartment in Manhattan as well and fly here a few times a week to be with Serenity.

"No. Your mentor."

"Debra's here?"

"It was supposed to be a surprise. Go answer the intercom. I'll check your bags as you asked."

Serenity

### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Days later

"Staring at it all day isn't going to help you make a decision," Debra says.

I nod my head in agreement, although I still can't decide what to do.

It's been seventy-two hours since I arrived in New York, and I haven't seen him since the kiss. He sent a message saying that he needed to be away on business for a few days and that there was no way I should go anywhere without my bodyguards.

I would prefer to talk on the phone instead of exchanging texts, but I'm not going to act needy.

That night he kissed me, I couldn't sleep.

It's ridiculous to compare the kiss I got from Otis with his. My friend is handsome and charming, but God, the Greek's touch... I don't know anything about men, but I know intuitively that Ares is the king of seduction.

He didn't force me into anything or touch me in any intimate place. It was a delicious kiss with some more intense caresses, and I swear to God I turned into putty in his hands. I have never felt so overwhelmed with emotion. My every cell connected to him, asking for more than he was giving.

As soon as Debra came up that day, Ares left, but not before telling me that he had searched my suitcases for any possible threat and had found nothing.

When I got to my room, my face felt like it was on fire. Yes, he'd done as I asked, but my luggage was open on the bed with my clothes scattered everywhere, including my lingerie. But that wasn't what left me dying of shame—rather it was the fact that a black thong, which goes with a lace bra, disappeared.

Did he steal my panties?

I told Debra about everything that happened, including the two spankings I received, and contrary to what I thought, she is super open-minded. She found it exciting.

I know she's still young—she turned thirty-eight last month—but even so, I didn't think she would take what's been happening between me and my guardian so well.

It was then that she explained to me that now, after turning thirty, she is starting to live. Like me, she was obsessed with dance and skipped several important stages in her life. When she suffered an injury that ended her career, she spent around three months not knowing what to do from then on, continuing to train despite being injured, which only worsened her condition.

Her story is very sad because, at the worst moment of her life, when she thought she had lost everything, she met someone—a love that helped her recover, build a new future, set up a dance school. And then, two years into their marriage, he died in an accident.

She has talked to me a lot about the fragility of life. We cannot deposit all our energy into one channel. I know she's telling me this for my own good because, like me, she is passionate about ballet. However, she has been trying to make me live a little. Go a little beyond daily rehearsals. Even though I haven't officially started at the dance

company I was hired for yet, I've practiced there every afternoon, religiously, since I set foot in New York.

We've been to a musical on Broadway, we've gone shopping, and we're planning a trip to a nightclub. But the decision that is paralyzing me at the moment has nothing to do with the "enjoy life" project and everything to do with my missing lingerie.

Debra said I should send a simple message to Ares: I know what you did.

I won't deny that the idea excites me. The only thing that's holding me back is the possibility that I'm wrong and he didn't take my thong, because then I'll die of shame.

"If you're so unsure about it, forget it," she says.

"No, I'm thinking. That message that you suggested, 'I know what you did,' is something that gives me some wiggle room."

"What kind?"

"Well, if he answers: 'What did I do?' or 'I have no idea what you're talking about, Serenity,' I can cover it up with some excuse. Like, 'You told the bodyguards to increase surveillance,' or something like that. It fits well with 'I know what you did.'"

She laughs and claps her hands. "It's a great idea. If you're going to take a leap, set up a safety net first."

"You are the best friend a girl could ask for."

"Maybe because, outside of ballet, my mental age is still close to yours. The only thing I feel one hundred percent confident about is dancing. Grado, my late husband, managed to adjust some pieces here"—she puts her hand on her heart—"and

here"—she puts the other on her forehead—"but I'm still insecure in several other aspects."

"Like a teenager?"

"No, a 'young girl' like you. I'm only immature in the head, because my body knows I'm not young anymore."

"You are in good shape."

"Yes, and I intend to continue to be. Now, seriously, don't do anything under my influence. I'm just a romantic fool."

"Do you think I'll be disappointed?"

"There's always that possibility, Serenity. Life doesn't come with guarantees, because if that were the case, I wouldn't have gotten hurt and would have continued with my career."

"But you wouldn't have met your husband either."

It was her late husband, an ambulance paramedic, who attended her when she was injured. If that isn't proof that it was written somewhere that they were meant to meet, I don't know what the word "destined" means anymore.

"Yes, it's true. Life is full of surprises. Sometimes good, sometimes bad, but guess what: the prize or loss only comes to those who take the risk."

"Fifty percent chance."

"In your case, no."

"I don't understand," I say.

"Serenity, Ares is a man in the full sense of the word. Besides that, he's handsome and rich. He can have any woman he wants. Don't take this badly, but changing your relationship, even if it's to an 'affair,' as he called it during the flight, will bring a lot of confusion into his life. If he's overlooking that and investing in his desire for you anyway, it's because there's something more, even if he hasn't realized it yet."

"You are right. You're a romantic, and you're seeing a love story where there is only attraction, Debra. The man told me he has never been with anyone for more than a week."

"Then make him sweat. He's used to easy sex. Seduce him. Take him to a place he's never been before."

"How?"

"I can't answer that. Follow your intuition."

I look again at the device I'm holding. My heart is racing to the point where I feel it beating in my ear, so I touch the screen and click "send".



Ares

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Three days before

#### NEW ORLEANS

The same night that I arrived with Serenity in New York, I needed to return to New Orleans.

I got a call from the hospital about Warren Van Lith, her old guardian. The old man was dying, and someone from his medical team contacted me, at his request, because it seemed the old man had no one else.

When I arrived at the hospital, I only needed to look at him to know that his case was terminal. I was with my paternal grandfather in his final moments, and he had the same farewell expression with which Serenity's former guardian looks at me now.

Seeing him on the verge of death, alone in a hospital, affected me more than I would like to admit.

He's a rich man, from what I can tell, and yet that didn't do him any good at the end of his life.

Invariably, my thoughts run to Serenity. She also doesn't have anyone other than Debra and JeAnne, and neither of them are family.

No, it will be different for her. Serenity is beautiful, young, and rich. She will find a man who will love her and with whom she will have an incredible future.

I feel a fucking ball lodge in my throat when I try to visualize this scenario. Instead of calming me down, it makes me feel even worse.

"I don't want her to know," Van Lith says weakly from the bed. "Tell her only after I go."

Even in his final moments, the man is the image of dignity. Even though he is weak and thin, with a slightly haggard look, he commands respect.

"The way you raised her, both you and JeAnne, shielding her from everything, is not the best way to prepare someone for life."

"In our own way, the nanny and I tried to meet the girl's needs."

I won't retort. There is no reason to argue with a man on his deathbed, although I think the opposite of what he is saying. Giving love to a child does not mean raising them in a rosy scenario where everything is perfect. Because, if my guess is right, they both failed miserably. Aside from dancing, Serenity is insecure about everything else.

"Why didn't you tell me the truth about the size of her fortune from the beginning?"

He gives me a weak smile. "I wanted you to be the man who would take over her guardianship. Even if there was no argument over the one percent of GordonBank, eventually I would have to get another guardian for her. I knew I was running out of strength and wouldn't last long. I can only attribute it to fate that our paths crossed."

"Why me?"

"I didn't want you, personally. Any of the Kostanidou would have done. I know your family's reputation. I knew that if she remained in your care, she would not be taken advantage of. You are honorable, and you are Greeks. It is said that your people place a high value on family."

"Serenity is not my family."

"By blood, no, but she would never have been just business to you, just as she never was for me."

"That's not what you've indicated all this time."

"I'm good at hiding my emotions. Serenity, or Miss Blanchet, as I call her to her face, has always been the sweetest, saddest child you could imagine. Closed off, not given to smiling, and I felt sorry for having to send her to that school in Germany. But there was nothing I could do. Her parents' will was very clear."

"She doesn't remember them."

"The human mind is a labyrinth, Ares." He pauses. "I think I can call you that, right, son?"

I nod.

"As I was telling you, the human mind is a labyrinth. It is likely that she has blocked out any memories of the past. And that's one of the reasons I called you here. First, I want to thank you for agreeing to take care of everything when I'm gone."

I don't say anything. How the hell do you react to something like that? How fucking heartbreaking is it that he needs a stranger to take care of things after his death?

"I have a box in my office containing documents and photographs from various stages of the first five years of Serenity's life. I don't know why, but her parents made sure the girl had memories of them, almost as if they knew they wouldn't live long. So, along with the will, they gave me this box. When they both lost their lives in the plane crash, I already had every possible means of organizing the little girl's life, but I fell ill, and it was a blessing that JeAnne was able to continue caring for her in the two months it took me to recover."

"But why haven't you given these belongings to Serenity already?"

"I'm an old coward. I became fond of the girl, and even after she grew up, I didn't want to break her heart. The letters her parents left her were a goodbye." He shakes his head. "It's very sad to see a family suddenly torn apart."

"I'll stop by your office to pick up the box. Tell me what you need, Van Lith. You have my word that I will fulfill all your requests."

"I was right to choose your family, Ares. I can die in peace. Serenity will be in good hands."

Now

## NEW ORLEANS

Seventy-two hours later, I leave the cemetery where I just buried, with only the priest and two gravediggers present, Warren Van Lith.

He asked me not to tell Serenity, and I will respect his wishes for now, but eventually I will. I'm not going to act like she's a fragile flower in a bell jar. Anyone who can withstand the absurd amount of training she does for ballet has a lot of strength within them.

I turn on my phone, which I had turned off for the funeral, and it vibrates with the arrival of two messages. The first is from Eleanor, Madison's stepmother:

Eleanor: Bring your girl to Sunday lunch. It's past time for her to meet our family.

I shake my head, unable to hold back a smile. My brother's mother-in-law is the most gregarious person I've ever met. Ever since Zeus started dating Madison, she's made a point of getting us all together for weekly lunches, and this only intensified when Brooklyn married Athanasios. Even the surgeon's parents are invited.

And now, she wants to add Serenity to the equation.

I hold the phone, and my selfish side wants to keep her separate, keep her all to myself, but I think about the last three days and how depressing it was to see the old man alone.

No, she deserves to be with us. I already crossed the line, anyway, when I kissed her. I would have done more if we hadn't been interrupted by Debra. Our relationship went beyond the concept of forbidden some time ago. Especially when I put her over my knee and spanked her ass.

I reply to Eleanor and move on to the next message.

It's from Serenity:

Serenity: I know what you did.

I tap the call button.

"Ares?" she answers, breathlessly, after the phone rings half a dozen times.

"I'm going to buy two dozen more of them. I don't want you to use any others."

"What?"

"You heard me. I want to imagine you in that G-string every day."

"I . . ."

"Throw the others away, Serenity. I'm going to fill your drawers with new lingerie, the kind I like."

"That's not part of your guardian duties."

"No, but I am expanding my duties from this moment on."

"I should say no."

"But you won't?"

"No. I want you to think of me dressed in that lingerie."

"Fuck!"

"You started it. When do you get back? By the way, where did you go?"

"We'll talk about that another day. I'm arriving in New York early in the morning, but I'm taking you to lunch with my family tomorrow."

Ares

### CHAPTER THIRTY

"What?"

"Are you more shocked by my family's invitation than me wanting to choose which panties you're going to wear, Serenity?"

"I don't . . . um . . . I never . . . I don't think I know how to deal with so many people together."

Now I'm the one who's fucking surprised. "You perform on stages all over the world, capturing the audience's undivided attention for hours."

"None of those people see me. They only see the dancer, not Serenity. I'm not good at this whole interacting with strangers thing."

"You don't want to go?"

"Why would I go? I don't know them. They are your family. That would only complicate things."

Is she scared of a simple lunch? Something in my chest contracts. "What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid. I just don't think it's appropriate."

"As I said before, that 'appropriate' line has already been crossed."

"And will it continue to be pushed farther and farther?"

"I don't understand."

"Will you kiss me again? I assume so, since you stole my panties."

"I didn't steal your panties. The others looked like grandma ones. In fact, I'm doing you a favor. I'll give you a complete new collection of lingerie."

"That sounds kind of perverted."

"What do you know about perversion?"

"Not much, but I've read about fetishes," she says, lowering her tone. From the noise in the background, I assume she's getting into the car with the driver.

"Where are you?"

"Leaving dance school."

I take advantage of the opportunity to change the subject. Thinking about Serenity and fetishes at the same time is a guarantee of an untimely erection. "On a Saturday?"

"I practice every day."

"Do you intend to do this forever?"

"I don't know. Debra said I need to vary my activities a little, but I don't want to lose focus."



I know that she has visited several places since I went away, but I also know that her mentor accompanied her the entire time.

"I'm taking you to Greece for a week as soon as you have a break between performances."

"What?"

I know I shouldn't, but I don't own SIN for nothing. I am a sinner and also a hedonist. I want Serenity on my island, swimming on my private beach. "I'm taking you on a trip."

"Just the two of us?"

"Do you want to bring anyone else?"

"No. Just the two of us sounds perfect."

"Even if I have nothing to offer later?"

"I'm not saying we'll go as a couple, Ares. Don't jump to conclusions."

That should make me feel relieved, but on the contrary, it irritates me. "Be ready at ten, tomorrow morning."

"I thought we were going for lunch."

"Yes, but my brother's mother-in-law likes to get everyone together around ten, and then we only leave there late at night."

"Ares, I don't know if I should go."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to get used to you. If the two of us fight or decide to keep everything on a professional basis..."

"You have my word that I will never send you away."

"You can't promise me that."

"Yes, I can. You are ours now, Serenity."

"It sounds like you're in the mafia."

"Exactly. There is no way out of the Kostanidis clan."

"I won't care if one day I have to walk away. I have Debra and JeAnne."

"And me."

"I don't have you. No one has you, Ares. You were very clear about that. Well, if you think I won't get in the way, I'll come."

"Be ready at ten."

"You already said that, Uncle Ares. Oops, I can't call you that anymore. No uncle would steal his niece's panties."

She hangs up before I can respond, and despite the depressing situation of the last few days, I feel lighter than I remember ever feeling before.

Oh, Serenity, what am I going to do with you?

First, stay away , the voice of reason warns.

However, I know it's too late. What I told her is true. We have crossed the forbidden bridge, and it will only get worse once she is among my family. Whatever happens, Serenity is ours.

The next day

The driver pulls into the garage of my building, but before he can get to my door to open it, I'm already outside. I don't like the feeling of anxiety, but that's exactly how I feel as I walk to the elevator.

I look at the dashboard, as if my mind can make it go faster. I took a shower during the flight because if we don't hurry, we will be late. Eleanor is a great person, but she hates us being late.

I reach out to touch the fingerprint ID to open her door but immediately recoil when I remember that this is Serenity's house and, here, I'm a guest. Either way, I feel pathetic ringing the doorbell.

I hear footsteps and a laugh, then seconds later, the door opens, but it's not Serenity who is in front of me. It's a blond boy as tall as me: fucking Otis Schulz.

"What are you doing here?" I growl.

"Ares." Serenity appears behind his shoulder, a little awkwardly. "This is Otis. He just arrived in the United States. He wanted to surprise me. Otis, this is my guardian, Ares Kostanidis."

I step forward without waiting for her to invite me in and without looking away from him. "You wanted to surprise her? She might not have been home."

He shrugs without smiling. Like me, he doesn't seem very happy to see me. "I would have found something else to do. Manhattan is very nice."

"It's a shame she's leaving," I say, approaching Serenity and placing a hand on the back of her neck. I feel her shudder, and the territorial son of a bitch in me is satisfied.

"Couldn't he come with us?" she asks.

"What?"

"Otis has to catch his flight back tonight."

"Did you come to the United States to see her just for one day?"

"She's worth it," the jerk says, giving Serenity a wink.

"Otis came to take a course. He's not in the country because of me. But yes, he came to see me in New York, even if just for a day. Do you think your brother's mother-in-law would mind another guest?"

Lie, the demon inside me says, but I can't do that to Eleanor.

"No."

Serenity smiles, and I wonder why she doesn't show that enthusiasm for me. I was away for almost four days.

"You can come, but by cab," I tell him.

"What?" Serenity looks confused.

"You're coming with me on a motorcycle, Serenity. There is no room for discussion."

The Evil

### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I feel the warm blood dripping down my thigh and through the fabric of my jeans. Only then do I realize that I'm holding the blade of the pocketknife I had been playing with while watching the entrance to my fiancée's building, hoping to see her.

Her move to Manhattan wasn't good for me. In Louisiana, it was easier to take care of Serenity, but maybe I went too far with the scorpion.

What can I say? I'm impulsive. I got upset. I don't like changes in plans, and my Serenity Clementine coming to New York definitely went against my wishes.

Old bastard Van Lith ruined everything by handing over the guardianship of the girl to Ares Kostanidis. The Greek doesn't cut her any slack. He placed so many security guards around Serenity that I couldn't even leave my gifts anymore.

Yes, the scorpion was indeed a wrong move. It made the Greek even more protective.

I should have remained discreet, and then, when the time came, I could have approached her and taken her for myself forever.

Instead, I'm forced to watch that bastard Kostanidis parading around with my bride as if she belongs to him.

They've just passed by on their motorcycle, and I'm so angry that if it weren't for the

three cars with bodyguards following them, I would run my truck into them and take her away at once, forgetting the plans I made so carefully.

I'm not worried about the Otis boy. I know their relationship was a sham. I even thought about killing him once, but I realized that it would be burning bridges for nothing—an unnecessary risk, since he's nothing more than a friend to my fiancée.

Of course, once we're married, that will have to change. I will not allow any men near Serenity other than me.

The phone rings, and when I see who it is, I answer reluctantly.

"What the hell are you doing in the lobby of her building? You know you're supposed to stay in the shadows."

I know he watches me, that he doesn't trust me. If he wasn't who he is, I would have killed him by now.

Keep me in the shadows?

I feel like laughing. No, I think not. I will always be close to her.

"Tell me you had nothing to do with that scorpion thing."

"Of course I didn't. Why would I hurt her? I want her whole."

"But when the time is right, you will have to do what is necessary."

"I know. I will do everything that was agreed at the beginning." I hang up before he says something that makes me lose control. I can't risk the damn idiot suspecting my true plans.

I will let him think that the initial agreement will be fulfilled. What he doesn't realize is that from the moment Serenity returned to New Orleans two years ago, I was no longer part of the team. Now, I'm a solo player and my greatest achievement will be stealing her for myself.



Ares

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

"Dial it down a little, Ares," Dionysus says as he passes me.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I grumble.

"If looks could kill, that boy would fall over backwards. What's going on between you and Serenity?"

"Nothing that's any of your business."

"So something is happening."

"I haven't decided yet."

"What?"

"You heard me. I don't know what to do about her yet. I want her."

"Holy shit!"

"Don't act surprised. You already guessed, or you wouldn't have noticed that I'm not happy with this unfortunate Otis hovering around her."

"I'm not surprised you want her. She is beautiful. I'm surprised that you just admitted

it out loud, even though I know what a hell of a mess it will be if you make her yours. And by yours , I mean in the full sense of the word. Serenity is not the type of woman you are used to."

"And was Cici your type, by any chance?"

"I married Cecily. I made her my wife and mother of my children. That's not what you want with Serenity. And what's more, she's your ward."

"She is an adult."

"Too sweet for you, brother," Hades says, approaching.

"You guys don't have anything else to do, do you?" I ask, worn out by the conversation, although my conscience says they are right.

I watch Eleanor cozying up to that asshole Otis, while a few steps away, Serenity seems engrossed in conversation with Athanasios. I don't believe he likes ballet, but he admires excellence in any field, and there is no doubt that she is a phenomenon at what she does.

I've seen several of her performances, without her knowing.

This is a secret that even my brothers don't know: that my sweet ward is also my obsession.

Yes, because what else do you call it when you want something you know you can't have and yet you continue playing with fire?

I never allowed myself to get close enough to let her know I was there, wanting her from a distance, because I knew that if I did, we'd end up naked on a bed.

I'm sure that if I make a move on her, it will have to involve commitment, and I don't want that for myself.

I still don't want that for myself, right?

I see the bastard approach her and place his hands on her hips. I take a step forward, but Dionysus holds me back.

"What are you going to do? You have no claim on Serenity."

"The hell not. She is my ward."

"Fuck, you're completely lost, Ares."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You want her for yourself, but you're too stubborn to admit it."

"I want to protect her, that's all. I know I shouldn't take her to bed. I'm just pissed that Serenity broke up with the asshole and yet he keeps going at it."

"She doesn't seem uncomfortable with her ex," Hades mocks.

"Go to hell."

"I already live there, brother. I am the god of the underworld."

"Meeting with Odin," Zeus says, approaching.

"I'm coming."

He looks back, right at where Serenity is with her shitty ex. "Now, brother. You don't want to upset Eleanor with your jealousy. A fight here between you and the German boy would definitely upset her."

"I'm not a jerk. I have no reason to fight him."

He laughs, making me a little more pissed off.

"Go to the library, Ares. He doesn't stand a chance with Serenity," Madison says as she approaches. Being the nosy person that she is, she was listening to our conversation.

"What do you mean?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm talking about. Serenity has looked at you all day. The boy is out of contention."

Almost an hour later, we are ending the video call with Odin and Christos.

"So, the man who put the scorpion in Serenity's bag at the airport was disguised as a woman?" I ask.

"Well, I'm assuming it's a man. And since the only person who approached her, according to the footage I watched, was an elderly woman, yes, I think the idiot disguised himself. Christos's friend Beau sent us the footage he got of the airport, from a different angle than I got."

"Yes. According to what he told me," my older cousin interjects, "the experts also concluded that it was a man in disguise."

"Why couldn't it have been a woman?" I ask.

"Wait a moment," Odin urges. He types something into the laptop, and then a small screen appears at the top of the video call.

In it, there is a lady slowly approaching Serenity. She seems harmless, walking with difficulty, and even when she bumps into the girl, her movements are slow.

"That must have been why she didn't attract the bodyguards' attention," Zeus says.

"Yes," Odin confirms. "Now notice that right after the bump, her behavior changes."

I watch, astonished, as the elderly woman almost runs away after refusing to accept help to get up.

Yes, now it looks like someone in disguise.

"Fuck me."

"Did you notice she was wearing gloves?" Odin asks.

"Yes. Wearing gloves in the middle of summer in Louisiana," Christos says.

"So that's it? Our hands are tied?" Zeus asks.

"So far, yes. If only Serenity had kept the tickets." Odin says.

"They would be useless. They did not contain DNA. Her mentor ordered them to be tested," I say.

Odin looks frustrated. "If she had told you sooner, we would never have gotten to this point, but maybe there is a solution. Let him think she is vulnerable."

"No, I'm not going to make Serenity a target. There has to be another way."

He nods. "All good. I don't like the idea, either. I'll think of another solutio

Serenity

### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I discreetly move away from Otis for the third time. I don't know what's going on with him today. He didn't touch me in public like this even when we were pretending to be lovers.

I adore him. I've grown to love him as the good friend he's become over the past two years, but right now, I'm praying that time passes quickly and that he returns to Germany soon.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Zeus's wife, Madison, asks.

She, together with Cici, the wife of Dionysus, and Brooklyn, the wife of the doctor, Athanasios, form a very lively team. I laughed a lot with the three of them today, and I couldn't help but notice that with every step they take, they are followed by the watchful eyes of their respective husbands.

"Yes, yes. I didn't want to be rude, but I needed to be alone for a while." If it were anyone else, I would be embarrassed to admit this, but Madison is the type to make me feel very comfortable.

I was kind of sneaking out the back door of Eleanor's huge house when she found me.

Her stepmother got married two months ago to an orthopedist who works at the hospital Athanasios owns with two other doctors. I heard that Brooklyn's husband and

his two partners received the modest nickname of “Gods in White,” as they are the foremost experts in the world in their respective fields.

"Is your ex bothering you?" she asks.

I think for a few seconds before responding, but finally I decide to tell the truth. I don't have any friends other than Debra, since JeAnne is more like a mother to me, and I don't want to start a friendship with Madison by telling lies. "We were never lovers."

"What?"

I feel my face heat up. "All those stories of our meetings in Europe that Otis told are true, but they were platonic. He kissed me once, but I didn't feel anything, so I didn't let it happen again."

"Jesus, but why did you two lie?"

"It was my idea," I confess, feeling the heat of shame increase.

"Why? Were you trying to get rid of a stalker?"

"No," I answer, although that's not entirely true, since there really is a madman chasing me. However, it wasn't because of my stalker that I lied. "I did it because I'm crazy. I'll tell you everything, but you have to swear you won't laugh."

"I won't. You have my word."

"Well, it all started two years ago, when Ares and I met for the first time..."

I tell her the whole story, without forgetting any details, including how my cocky



bastard of a guardian said that he didn't go out with girls, only women, so there was no point in falling in love with him.

"It doesn't surprise me," she says, finally, laughing. "The Kostanidou have an unparalleled arrogance. Or maybe it's a problem with Greeks in general, because my sister's husband leaves nothing to be desired in that regard either."

"I was an idiot. I got caught up in a lie, and now I don't know how to get out of it. Otis seems eager to annoy Ares, which doesn't help my situation."

"Ares is jealous of you, Serenity."

"What? No way. He's controlling, bossy, but I doubt it's jealousy. I think he's attracted to me, but that's it." I don't tell her about the kiss he gave me or that he stole my panties, because everything has a limit.

"It's jealousy, and from what I'm reading on your face, the attraction is mutual, so I'm going to give you some unsolicited advice: don't let him be the one to make decisions about the two of you. All Kostanidou are used to commanding and being obeyed. Don't be another face in his long line of conquests."

"My mentor and best friend said something similar. That I should make him sweat. But I don't even know where to start. He sees me as a child."

"I have an idea."

"What's that?"

"Relax. Trust me. If it works, we'll drive this bunch of Greeks crazy. I will ask Ares to let us all go to SIN today. Let's dance the night away. I doubt that when the night is over, he will still consider you a little girl."

"What?"

"Trust me. If you want him to no longer see you as a girl but as a woman, SIN is the ideal place."

"He will never agree to that."

"I got it. If I can convince Zeus, we'll have all the reinforcements we need on our side."

"And why would your husband, a banker, agree to go to what the press calls a place to sin ?"

"Because we have history there," she says enigmatically, without giving further explanation.

We enter the house together, and I almost bump into Otis, who is coming out.

Did he follow me out here?

"Where did you go?" he asks, but he doesn't sound angry. However, when we get to the living room and see Ares coming out of what I know to be the library, since Eleanor took us on a tour of the house, he continues, "I was looking for you to say goodbye, Serenity. Any chance you can take me to the airport?"

I look at him and want to cry. Why is he acting like this? My loyalty does not allow me to embarrass him, however. So I walk over to him and put my arm through his. "I'll walk you to the door."

I wait for him to say goodbye to everyone, and I pretend that I don't notice that Ares follows my movements carefully.

Eleanor, like the sweetheart that she is, offers her driver to take him to the airport.

We go down the stairs arm-in-arm, in silence, but when we get to the car, where the driver is waiting with the door open, I say, "Why are you acting like this?"

"He wants you."

"Even if it's true, it's none of your business, Otis. We are friends. Over the last two years, we pretended to date, but you never stopped going out with your women, even if it was in secret. I never cared, and I still don't, because that's not the way I love you."

"You could learn to love me like that."

"Don't do that. I don't want to lose your friendship."

"Serenity—"

"Don't think that because I'm young and inexperienced, I'm malleable too, Otis. I only do what I want because I learned to make decisions on my own when I was very little. I may not know much about the world, but I know everything about myself—what I feel and, most importantly, what I don't feel."

"He's no good for you, Serenity. You two?—"

"There is no 'us two.'"

"Yet . I am a man. He wants you, but I've looked him up. The guy has a reputation for discarding women like clothes he no longer wants."

"I will ask you once again not to interfere. Please don't drive me away. Don't make

our friendship impossible."

"I can't see you go into the wolf's den and just stand there and watch. I need some time."

"What? Are you trying to say this is the end of our friendship?"

He stays silent for a few seconds, and for a moment, I'm afraid he's going to say yes, but then he pulls me into his arms and kisses me on the forehead. "If he hurts you, I'll always be waiting."

"Because you are a wonderful friend. And I will always be here for you, too."

"I'm being a selfish asshole, right?"

"Yes, you are. I never felt jealous of your women."

"Never?"

"No. I want you to be happy."

"I feel like shit right now."

"You were a little bit of an asshole, but you are forgiven. Send a message when you arrive in Germany."

"I will. Take care."

Serenity

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

I'm almost at the house, walking distractedly and looking at the ground, when I hit a concrete wall.

Except the wall has strong arms, it's warm, and the smell of it acts as a kind of numbing agent on my senses.

It takes me a few seconds to look up at him, and at the same time I wonder if he doesn't mind them seeing us like this, because now Ares has one of his arms around my waist.

The white dress shirt he wears, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, has the top two buttons open. I can see some skin, and I close my fists to control the urge to open the rest one by one.

"Did you lie when you said you weren't together anymore?"

I seriously consider telling the truth about the dating scam, but I don't want to embarrass Otis in front of the person he views as his rival, even though, truth be told, there is no rivalry at all. On a planet where Ares Kostanidis breathes, I will never be able to pay attention to another man.

"No," I say simply, but he doesn't look satisfied and grabs my chin to make me look at him.

"I'm taking you home."

"What?" That's not what I was expecting to hear. I was super excited about Madison's idea of us going to SIN .

"My sister-in-law got it into her head that she wants to go dancing at SIN, and my brothers will go with their wives."

"And you?"

"It's my place of work."

"Well, have a nice time, then," I say, letting go of him and heading for the door.

"Say goodbye to Eleanor and the rest of the family," he commands, as if I were a little girl.

I don't know what irritates me more, that he thinks he can boss me around, ordering me to say goodbye to his family, or that he's decided that I can't go to SIN without even consulting me. I know, however, that standing up to him alone is a bad strategy. I need an ally. Or two.

I run up the stairs, without looking back, and almost collide with Cici and Madison.

Brooklyn says goodbye to me, as does her husband, who is holding one of the children on his lap, already asleep. The rest of the troop is taken away by their bodyguards.

After they pass us, Madison says, not at all discreetly, "She knows about our plan." She nods to Cici, who smiles. I feel like I'm part of a secret society working on a conspiracy.

"Know what?" I say, pretending ignorance, and she rolls her eyes.

"About you and Ares."

I open my mouth to deny it, but then close it.

"Be cool, he's coming," she whispers to me.

"He wants to take me home."

"No way. I got it." She smiles the biggest smile, which I'm sure must work on Zeus, but I don't think it will have any effect on my guardian. "Ares, I asked Serenity to come with us to SIN and?—"

"No," he says with his usual arrogance, cutting her off.

"Why not? Are you saying your club isn't a respectable place?"

"Have you explained to her what SIN is about?"

Madison shakes her head, and I can tell she's trying not to laugh.

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"Could you excuse me so I can speak privately with my ward?"

"No," they both say, almost in chorus.

"Let me explain," Cici says. "SIN is a place to fulfill sexual fantasies, but without the sex itself, unless you are with a steady partner."

I try to pretend that hearing this is no big deal. I summon all the training I received at the German boarding school and keep my expression calm, but inside I am experiencing a turmoil of emotions.

Jealousy is the main one.

Does he go to a place that's centered around sex every night?

God, I really am an idiot! Did I believe I had a chance with a man like that?

"Um... I think he's right, Madison. I better go home." I could stop there, but I can't help myself and I do the stupidest thing in the world, adding: "I want to get to sleep early because Otis said that as soon as he gets to Germany, he will call me."

Ares' posture changes. "Afraid to face the real world, little girl?" he asks, walking in front of me, and at the same time, I notice that Madison and Cici disappear inside the house.

"Are you kidding me? A few minutes ago you wanted to take me home."

"I changed my mind. Maybe you need a reality check."

"What will I find there?"

He gives me a smile that doesn't show the slightest bit of humor, almost cruel, and I know he's not going to take me to SIN to educate me but rather to shock me.

"Why tell you when I can show you?"

I don't know what I expected. The press created a fuss around SIN, but the truth is that, inside, at least in the lounge we are in, it is very reminiscent of a nightclub that



Debra took me to once, in Paris.

The decor is all in black, with some purple details, and I can't express how much I love it. Purple is my favorite color.

You don't need to be an expert to realize that the place is made for the very rich, a tiny part of society.

Where we are, there's a small dance floor, and just now Madison told me that she's performed at SIN before . That is how she met her husband, Zeus.

Two waitresses come to serve us drinks, but despite being scantily clad, there's nothing explicit.

Ares told me he would come to work, but he hasn't left his brothers' side for a second.

"Let's dance!" Madison calls.

Cici grumbles, "Ah, that's so unfair. One of you was born for this, and the other is considered the world's greatest ballet dancer."

"Don't be silly," Zeus's wife says, pulling us both onto the dance floor.

The lounge is quite big, but it's just us here.

I enjoy the music, getting totally engrossed in the beat, and I forget about the rest of my problems, as always happens when I immerse myself in my art. I let the rhythm control my body, enveloping me, but at a certain moment, when I open my eyes, Ares is focused on me. He doesn't even hide it. While his brothers are talking, he turns his body towards me.

Like our first meeting, I can't see his face, but even so, a shiver of excitement runs through me. The problem is that I don't know how to get the attention of a man like him, and after about five minutes, I excuse myself and go to the bathroom to splash some water on my face.

I know I need to go down some steps because Madison kind of explained where the bathroom was, but when I test the door I thought it would be, instead of the toilet, I find a room with dark walls. In the background, there is glass, like those in interrogation rooms.

When I take a few steps inside, I open my mouth, completely shocked. On the other side of the glass is a couple. Both are naked, the woman lying on a high bed and the man massaging her body with oil.

I should go back, but I'm fascinated by the look of pleasure on her face, so I move closer to the glass, planting my palms on it, because I don't trust the strength of my legs.

Suddenly I realize that if they turn, they'll catch me in the act of watching them.

I take a few steps back, but my escape is cut short when I crash into a hard body behind me.

I know it's him without needing to turn around, and I almost die when his hands come to my waist and he whispers in my ear, "They can't see you, naughty girl."

Ares

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

She's barely breathing. I can feel it because I run a hand up her abdomen, and the movement Serenity makes to draw in air is as smooth as the flutter of a butterfly's wings.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, running my lips over the shell of her ear. She shudders against me, unconsciously pushing her body back, searching for friction.

"I was looking for the bathroom."

"I know, but when you came in and saw that it wasn't here, you continued watching. Is that what you want to do? To watch?"

Instead of answering me, she responds with another question, "Who are they?"

"A couple, otherwise they wouldn't be touching."

Even though she speaks to me, I know she is focused on the scene unfolding in front of us. "Why not?"

"SIN is not a brothel. In part, it's a regular, elite nightclub, but there are rooms like the one you see here, where people come to fulfill fantasies."

"And what's their deal?"

"To be watched. Now, tell me if you want to stay or leave, Serenity."

"I . . . um . . . want to stay . . . for a while."

I walk forward, to the glass, taking her with me, our bodies pressed together.

I choose one of the high chairs, since the viewfinder starts at my waist line. I sit down, pulling her onto my lap.

"What are we doing?"

"Getting comfortable," I reply.

That is the biggest fucking lie in the world. From the moment I saw her dance, comfort was the last thing I was feeling.

Since she got on the dance floor, I've spent every moment with an erection. When she left to go to the bathroom, I had no intention of taking advantage of her in a private place. I was worried because she was taking too long. Although it is rare, it may happen that a client goes overboard and tries to force himself on a woman. Since we opened, there have only been two episodes: one of them with Madison, in which the guy tried to get on stage while she was dancing. Zeus went crazy, and the son of a bitch was cast out for good. The second case was similar and had the same ending, but in general, anyone who comes here knows that if they cross the line, they will be out, with no second chance to get back in.

Either way, I'll never take any chances where Serenity is concerned.

She is inexperienced, with only one boyfriend in her past as far as I know, but is she aware of how sexy she is, how hot she is? I would bet not. Nothing about her is rehearsed. She makes no effort to seduce and yet she leaves any male—with the

exception of my brothers, who are already tamed—wanting to lie down on the floor so she can climb over them.

I look at the couple's performance and try to imagine what she sees. At the moment, they are not doing anything major. Despite being naked, the guy is just giving his partner a sensual body massage.

Serenity is rigid in my lap, and I grip her face, forcing her to look back at me.

"One word from you and we leave."

In the semi-darkness of the room, the blue of her eyes is even deeper. "I want to stay." She turns around again and leans forward, hands flat on the glass. "You said they like to be watched. Is that what you like?"

"No. I don't share my partners, not even visually. That doesn't turn me on."

"And watching—do you like that?"

"Not particularly." I lean forward and bite her ear. "But I'm turned on from wondering whether you are wet from watching him touch her."

"Are you sure they can't see us?"

"Yes I am. Is that what you're afraid of? Not of sitting on my lap watching a couple about to fuck?"

"You have a dirty mouth."

"Very dirty." I lift her hair and bite the back of her neck. She rolls her hips in my lap.

I wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her ass onto my dick. I make her rub against me, and one of her arms comes away from the glass and reaches back, wrapping around my neck.

"Should I be ashamed?" she asks.

"Forget the rules, Serenity. Don't think about what you think would be right to do—tell me what you want."

"He's massaging his partner."

"Yes."

"I want . . ."

"What?"

"Can you do the same to me, but without us getting naked?"

I can't hold back a laugh, even though my dick is completely swollen with excitement. "I have no intention of letting you get naked here, baby."

She doesn't say anything. She leans back against my chest, takes the hand that was wrapped around her waist, and kisses it. I turn her face and attack her mouth. The desire I've suppressed all day emerges unchecked.

This time, she returns the kiss with the same hunger. Greedy, wet, her delicious tongue snaking against mine.

When a moan comes out of the room's speaker, she separates our lips and looks straight ahead again. The man licks his partner's nipples, and Serenity looks at the

scene as if she's hypnotized.

Without saying anything, I open three buttons on her blouse and cup her small, firm breast.

She chokes, trembling.

"Shhh . . . I just want to make you feel good. You're dying of lust, beautiful."

She leans back against my chest, and I lower the cups of her bra.

Serenity continues to look at the couple, but she trembles deliciously when I caress both of her nipples with my thumbs.

"That looks so dirty."

"Isn't that the best kind of sex?"

"Dirty?"

"Yup. Dirty, sweaty, hard."

"Ahhhhh . . ."

I cup the peaks of her breasts and let one of my hands slide to the apex of her thighs. I press on her clitoris, and she almost jumps off my lap.

"Ares . . ."

"Is that good?"

"Yes."

I undo the button on her jeans and play with the waistband of her panties. I don't slide my hand inside; I focus back on her breast, tugging the nipple slightly to make her feel a sting of pain.

Her moan almost makes me come. Serenity is very responsive, a total turn-on.

"I want you naked and open for me. I want to lick that pussy and make you come on my tongue."

"I want it all too. I don't know if I'll be able to do it, but . . . Oh . . ."

Now my finger is inside her panties, touching her clit, and her body's response is wild.

"Keep talking," I command.

"Later. Don't stop."

I smile at her bossy tone. She may still be very green, but she knows what she wants.

"Raise your butt a little."

She stands up, and I pull her pants and panties down.

"Look straight ahead, Serenity. See how he has his face positioned between his woman's thighs? He's going to lick her pussy, but I doubt he'll be as hungry as I will be when I have you on my face. I will devour you."

"My God, Ares." She's soaked, the folds of her sex luscious with lust, and I don't need more than a few minutes to make her come.



For a long time, she shudders in my arms, and then she is so still that I think she has fallen asleep. I dress her, and my only thought now, even though I know I'm headed for a hell of a mess, is that I want to get her out of here and have her naked in my bed.

I adjust her bra and close her shirt, and she remains quiet.

"All good?" I ask, starting to worry.

She nods, but it's not enough, so I turn her towards me, making her straddle me.

"What is wrong?"

She spreads her hands on my chest. "I thought that this feeling that people describe during orgasm was some kind of legend."

It takes me a while to understand what she says and when I do, I mentally curse that idiot of an ex-boyfriend. "You never came when you were with him?"

Is it possible? Not even alone, touching herself?

"With him?"

The last thing I want is to bring that bastard ex-boyfriend's name into the conversation, but I need to know. Apparently, they spent almost two years together, the damned selfish man.

"Your ex."

"Oh!" she says, surprised, but then she smiles. "No. We never. We haven't..."

Before she completes the sentence, a suspicion begins to unfold in my brain, and in a

matter of seconds, I understand, but even so, I demand confirmation. "Serenity, are you a virgin?"

Her look of shame gives me the answer, and I think she sees the shock on my face too, because she jumps off my lap like she's sitting on hot coals.

We face each other in the dim light, neither of us seeming to know what to say. I feel like the biggest deviant that ever lived, but in my defense, it never crossed my mind that she was still untouched.

"I want to go back," she says, and I see how embarrassed she is. She starts walking to the door.

I press a button to dim the display with the couple on the other side and turn off the sound, where the moans are now more intense. "Serenity, wait..."

Damn, I let a virgin watch what is practically a live porn movie.

Suddenly, when she's almost at the exit, we hear two knocks, and then the door opens with Cici and Madison outside.

"Ah, you were here . . . Sorry, we..."

For the first time since I've known her, I see Madison embarrassed.

"I got lost," Serenity explains, walking towards them, "and now I'm tired. I want to leave."

Serenity

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

I couldn't say how we got out of SIN .

I have no idea how I said goodbye to Madison and Cici; I'm just vaguely aware that they said they'd call me next week.

Without saying a word, Ares takes me to the back of the club, to the exclusive parking lot.

I see the driver, as well as the bodyguards, waiting for us, and I realize that we will not return on the motorcycle.

Ares helps me into the car and watches me fasten my seat belt. When the driver takes his place behind the wheel, Ares closes the partition to give us privacy, but he doesn't try to talk to me until we arrive at the building we live in. Inside the elevator, I have to force myself to stay still, because I feel like his eyes are boring into me.

When we finally stop at my floor, I prepare to say goodbye, but he follows me outside the elevator.

Ares grabs me by the shoulders and turns me towards him. "We need to talk. I had no idea that..."

I wave my hand, without looking at him, and nod. "I know. You assumed I was

experienced."

"Experienced, no, but I never imagined that after two years in a relationship..."

"I'd still be a virgin?"

"That."

"I'm sorry for the confusion."

"Confusion? You think it was a simple misunderstanding? You are innocent, untouched, and I abused your trust."

"You asked me if I wanted to leave. I made the decision to stay. I loved every second of it and would do it all again."

"You don't know what you're saying. It's not going to happen again. The first man in a girl's life is very important. Trust me, when you look back in the future, you'll regret it if I was that guy."

I can't imagine giving myself to anyone else.

Of course I don't say anything like that. I've already had my fair share of humiliation for the rest of the year.

"Good evening, Ares."

"Serenity . . ."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Call me a bastard. I deserve it."

I open the door with my fingerprint, but before entering, with my hand on the doorknob, I turn to him again. "No. I'll call you my first everything . You cannot make the memory of what happened disappear. And I don't want to forget."

I enter quickly, because my courage was just enough to release what was weighing me down.

I walk to the bedroom on the second floor and throw myself on the bed without taking off my clothes, still feeling him inside me, wanting more, even though it will probably never happen again.

Days later

I'm avoiding him.

Yes, it's not dignified or honorable, but I still haven't recovered from the shame of our conversation because of what happened at SIN . I didn't even have the courage to tell Debra—who is in Louisiana, by the way.

God, why did I say those things? If Ares had any doubt that I was an inexperienced fool, it vanished in that moment.

We've only been talking via text, which seems ridiculous since we live just one floor away. Ares has given me space, which is a blessing. I wouldn't know how to be casual after what happened.

Both Cici and Madison called me and wanted to arrange something for my twenty-first birthday in a few months. I agreed but asked them not to talk about the date with Ares. I'm sure he doesn't remember.

Three weeks from now will be my debut as prima ballerina of the New York City Ballet, and the anxiety is already hitting me hard. I don't need another reason to be tense, and any contact with my Greek guardian would worsen my condition.

I look at my phone on the bed and call JeAnne, praying she'll answer. Since I arrived in New York, we've only spoken three times. I understand that she didn't want to come live in Manhattan, but after so many years together, is she going to cut me out of her life, like a Band-Aid ripped off and discarded in the trash?

When we talk on the phone, she seems fine but not as mellow as she used to be, and I wonder if I did something to upset her.

"Serenity, how are you?" she answers on the third ring.

"JeAnne, did I do something to hurt you?" I ask, because every time she's distant with me, it's like a stab to the heart.

"Hurt me?"

"You're different with me now."

"I'm having some problems, Serenity."

"Can I help? Do you need money?"

"It's nothing you need to worry about."

"And your coming here? Don't you want to see the city? My apartment is huge. I can arrange a charter flight for you. You wouldn't even need to come by a commercial one." I hate to sound desperate, but I'm tired of pretending I'm never sad.

"It is not necessary. I will come soon."

"Okay," I say, because it's clear she doesn't want to continue talking, but just as I'm about to hang up, she calls my name. "Yes?"

"Are you happy there?"

"I'm fine, JeAnne. I have new friends, and I live in an incredible place."

"That's not what I asked."

I think about the question. Am I happy? I have everything a girl my age could want, so why don't I feel fulfilled?

"Yes, I'm happy," I lie.

"Did you know that Van Lith passed away?"

"What?"

"He died a few days ago."

"How do you know?"

"There was a note in the newspaper. I thought Mr. Kostanidis would tell you."

"And why would he know?"

"Because he was the only person present at the funeral."

"When was that?"

"Soon after you moved to New York."

"But you and I spoke after that. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I forgot."

"No, you didn't forget. You read the newspapers daily and have a sharp mind. Why didn't you tell me, JeAnne?"

"I assumed your new guardian had done so. As you never mentioned the subject, I thought you didn't care."

That hurt more than the previous lie. Is that what she thinks of me, that I wouldn't even send Mr. Van Lith a wreath? Does she believe I'm an insensitive, selfish person?

"I have to go," I say. "Take care."

"Serenity?"

"Yes."

"I love you, child."

"Thanks."

I turn off my phone, furious, and put on shorts and a t-shirt, determined to go after the arrogant man who thinks he can hide something so important from me.

I need Ares to understand once and for all that I'm not a baby.

I go up to his apartment and ring the doorbell, but no one answers. Of course he



wouldn't be home—at this time, he's probably at SIN . That should be my cue to go to sleep, but I'm too upset to ignore everything that's happened, so I decide that, at least for today, I won't be the good girl everyone expects.

I go back to the apartment, grab my phone, and call Madison to share my plan with her.

Her response would make me laugh if I weren't so angry.

"He's going to kill us both."

"So you're not going to help me?"

"Of course I'm going to. Give me half an hour to ask my mother to come and stay with the children. I don't like leaving them with just the nannies. Then I'll come by and pick you up."

Ares

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

"Sir, did you hire a new dancer?" Elmer asks, walking into my office at SIN without knocking, which, given his formal manner, is very unusual.

"New dancer?" I ask, confused.

I'm not the one who interviews them personally. I have a whole team to do it. They go through several screenings. The only time I was involved in hiring an employee was when I needed one who was bilingual, to ensnare Rey Cardona de la Vega and convince him to sell his companies to us.

"From your surprise, I guess not. May I speak openly, Mr. Kostanidis?"

"What is wrong?"

"Your sister-in-law arrived . . . actually, your two sisters-in-law, Mrs. Madison and Cecily Kostanidis, saying there was a special performance tonight with a new dancer. I apologize in advance for what I'm about to say, sir, but I think they're . . . um . . . up to something ? I think it's the only expression that fits in this case," he says, as if the words scratch his throat.

I get up and walk to the door. "Where are they?"

"In the audience."

"Did my brothers come too?"

"No, sir, but I already took the liberty of calling them both to let them know that their wives are here."

"Fuck!"

"Sir . . . did I do wrong?"

"No, Elmer. Everything is fine. The 'fuck' is because I think you're right. They must really be up to something."

I'm already in the hallway when, suddenly, a suspicion enters my mind as I remember how Serenity and I said goodbye to each other, and also the fact that she has been avoiding me like the plague.

No, she wouldn't dare do shit like this to piss me off, just to prove the point that she's not a kid.

"Take me to that dancer."

"Um . . . It's a little late for that, sir. She's already on stage."

"Where are Madison and Cici?"

"Come with me. I will show you."

It doesn't take me long to see Cici's red hair among the spectators, but as I approach the two of them, my attention is captured by the "new dancer."

Even though she's wearing a mask that covers half her face, I'd recognize those doll

eyes anywhere. I know I should get her off the stage immediately, but my arrival coincides with the exact moment she turns and sees me.

It's as if she was waiting for me, and now she looks at me as if it's only the two of us in the room.

Serenity dressed in a tiny black leather bikini on stage at my nightclub is like my dirtiest fantasy come true. An angel entering hell and tempting sinners.

As much as I want to snatch her away, I'm mesmerized by the sway of her hips.

Her body is more delicate than any of my employees', but I've never been tempted by any of them. The woman who teases me just by breathing, however, makes me hard like a teenager discovering sex.

"Ares." I hear Madison's voice calling me, sounding amused, but even so, I don't look away from the woman who's managed to entangle me in her web without even being aware of it.

"You two are going to pay me for this," I say, bending down so only they can hear. "Zeus and Dionysus are coming."

I don't give them time to respond; I head straight for the backstage with Elmer on my tail.

"Have the music discreetly stopped and turn off the stage lights," I tell him. "And don't follow me."

What seems like a lifetime later, I arrive backstage. "Everyone, out."

I don't need to speak a second time before my employees disappear.

I open the curtains, and although the melody is slowly fading away, the stage is in darkness.

I see Serenity's ass barely covered by her tiny bikini, and my self-control goes to hell. I walk over to where she is, throw her over my shoulder and start walking to my office.

Neither of us speaks along the way, and it's a good thing that's the case. She tries to kick me, but I slap her ass, holding both legs together.

I enter my office and close the door with one foot. I place her on her feet, open a security panel, and turn off the cameras that are recording us. They don't have sound, but they have a motion sensor, and as soon as someone enters my office, they are activated.

"I don't do private dances," she says with audacity as I lock the door and approach her.

I don't think twice before untying her mask behind her head. I want to remain indifferent, but I've suppressed my hunger for her for too long.

"What the hell were you trying to prove?"

"That I'm not a child anymore," she says, lifting her chin.

I look at her, starting from her feet in high-heeled shoes up to her dance-toned thighs and the small pieces of leather covering her body.

When my gaze finally reaches her neck, I notice her skin is flushed, and the blush is spreading across her face.

"I know you're not a girl, but now it's time for you to understand once and for all that I'm a man, not a boy."

There is not an ounce of gentleness when I pick her up and sit her on my desk. She doesn't have time to breathe before my mouth slams into hers, tongue demanding, forcing her to surrender.

Lust spirals out of control and attacks me in waves of overwhelming desire.

She responds to the kiss with a dedication that only makes my lust worse.

I feel her hard nipples against my chest, and reaching behind her back, I unclasp her bikini bra. I'm almost lying on top of her, my mouth running over her lips, chin, jaw, biting into the warm flesh of her neck.

I move down and suck on an erect nipple. She moans my name and wraps her thighs around my waist.

I lick her abdomen at the same time as I undo the ties on the sides of her leather panties. "You're shaking, Serenity. I'm dying to taste you, but you can ask me to stop right now."

She shakes her head. "I want everything, Ares."

I don't think she knows what she's asking me for, and I don't even intend to fuck her here in SIN . I'm not that insensitive, and I know that a woman's first time should leave an impression.

I continue the trail of wet kisses down her abdomen and pull her to the edge of the table in order to position her as I want.

When our bodies touch, I can almost feel her heart beating fast.

"Your body wants to surrender to me, baby."

She blushes but lifts her arms above her head, placing her hands flat on the desk, in a silent offer.

Holding her by the ass, I lift her off the table, bringing her thighs to my shoulders, and breathe in the sweet smell of her aroused sex.

"Have you ever been touched here?" I ask, parting her pussy lips and licking from the opening to her clit.

She whimpers and shakes her head no.

Yes, she said she was a virgin and that I gave her, her first orgasm, but that doesn't mean . . .

I don't want to think about it. It doesn't matter what happened before.

"Forget it," I say.

"No one has touched me intimately but you. Nowhere on my body. As I told you that day, you will be my first everything."

Fuck!

I can't wait any longer to eat her pussy. She glows with desire, and I bend down, eager to taste her honey. The smell of her lust is driving me out of control. With one hand, I separate the soaked lips, and with the other, I lightly caress her clit.

Her reaction is pure lust. She uses her feet on my back as leverage, lifting her ass off the table and offering herself as a sweet sacrifice to my tongue.

I lick and suck her pussy with my mouth open. I suck away her excitement, which has just become my favorite drink. My tongue constantly searches her luscious interior, teasing the untouched flesh, without stopping massaging her pleasure point.

I part my lips, trying to take in everything. I want to get on the floor and make her sit on my face, riding my tongue, but I know it's a lot for someone so innocent.

I suck on her clit and put a finger inside her without going deep. It drives me crazy when I feel how tight she is, and my cock twitches, wanting to feel the tight heat.

She trembles with pleasure, pushing herself against my face, pulling my hair in delight.

I bury my mouth in her slippery folds, eating, devouring, wanting everything from her. "Fill my mouth with your honey, Serenity. Feed me." I grab her hips, bringing her even closer to me, and she trembles, excited.

I work my tongue against her walls, giving her a taste of how it will feel when I fill her with my thick length. I suck on her clit, hard, and it doesn't take long for it to stiffen, giving her her first orgasm.

I don't stop. Only one request from her could restrain me, because I'm hungry.

I suck her sex and fuck her with tongue and fingers. When she comes for the second time, moaning my name, her head falls gently onto the tabletop.

I stand up and look at her.



Open, ready, having surrendered herself deliciously to me.

I want her like I've never wanted a woman in my life, but I force myself to stop.

When I make her mine, it won't just be her surrendering—I'll teach her everything. I want her with me, not seduced, but master of her own desire.

Serenity hasn't woken up. Perhaps the combination of the unusual night and the two orgasms exhausted her.

I have extra shirts in the closet in my living room, and after putting her bikini back on her, I put one of the shirts on over it.

There is a secret passage through which I can leave without being seen by any regulars, and after sending a message to my driver, he will be waiting for us at this second exit.

Once inside the vehicle, I try to put a seat belt around her body, but Serenity snuggles into my lap, her arms around my neck as a soft snore escapes her lips.

Almost half an hour later, when the driver pulls up to my building, I walk out with her in my arms towards her apartment.

I shake my head, sending a clear message to the bodyguards that they don't need to go up with me.

I enter the private elevator, and not for a second do I stop looking at the beautiful, sleeping face. I've never seen myself as a jealous man, but I wanted to pluck out the eyes of everyone who watched her performance today.

The elevator stops on her floor, and with difficulty, I touch the fingerprint scanner to

open the door. I walk straight to her room. I lay her down on the bed and listen to her mumble.

I don't want to go. I want to pick up where we left off, but this is not a decision I can take back tomorrow morning, so I need to think and consider very carefully the path we take from here on out.

I free her from her high-heeled shoes, then brush the hair out of her eyes and cover her with the sheet. My gaze travels over her beautiful body and the small triangle of cloth that covers her pussy; my mouth waters when I remember the taste of her and how she came for me.

I force myself to move away, and I'm almost at the bedroom door when I notice, inside the closet, several boxes of jewelry, all of which I bought for each performance she's given over the last two years.

They are untouched, still sealed. Why? Didn't she even bother to check what I chose? Each piece is exclusive. I ordered them especially for her.

I pick up a small one, which I know is a ring, because all the others are matching earrings and necklaces.

What does it mean that she didn't have the curiosity to open them?

Otis.

Of course, she was in a serious relationship, and I, like a damn obsessive, silently harassed her with my gifts.

Confused for the first time I can remember, I leave her apartment

Serenity

### CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

I didn't expect him to be here when I woke up, but I was very upset when, on getting up, I saw the familiar three dozen calla lilies in a vase on the dining table and a jewelry box next to it.

For any other woman, perhaps it represents an attempt to seduce, to please. For me, it reminds me of the two years he remained distant.

"It was Mr. Kostanidis who ordered it to be delivered," the maid says, entering the room. "Aren't they beautiful?"

I nod, unable to speak.

"He asked you to call him as soon as you woke up. It looks like your cell phone is turned off, Miss Blanchet."

It's not turned off. It's with Madison. She told me that you can't use phones inside SIN, so I handed her mine before going on stage.

God, what a fool I made of myself!

After everything that happened, he didn't change how he sees me at all: as a silly girl.

If it weren't for me being injured by the scorpion, would he even have approached

me? Would we even have seen each other at all once we lived in the same city?

I woke up happy, feeling full in my body and mind. What happened yesterday seemed like a dream, but now, I'm starting to think I embarrassed myself last night. The flowers and jewelry are a kind of message: nothing has changed.

I go to the bathroom, forcing myself to take a shower and move on to my only comfort when I feel alone: dancing.

Four hours later, my body is worn out enough that at least for a while, I've forgotten about everything else other than my art.

During one of the breaks I took, one of the bodyguards handed me my phone with a note from Madison, asking me to call her.

There were also messages from Ares, but I ignored them.

I talked to Madison for about ten minutes and was happy that neither she nor Cici had gotten into trouble with their husbands because of my stupid idea of annoying Ares by performing at SIN .

I'm getting ready to go into the changing room because I feel exhausted, but one of the other dancers intercepts me along the way. He's very friendly, but I'm not sure what his name is, and I tell him that, even at the risk of being rude.

"Powers," he says, smiling.

We talk for a while, and he makes me laugh several times. When he invites me for a bite to eat, I decide to accept. Debra is traveling, and the other option would be staying home alone.

Maybe that's what I need: to get away from the Kostanidou for a bit, to make new friends.

Only then do I remember what JeAnne told me: I still need to ask Ares why he didn't tell me about Mr. Van Lith's death.

Not today, however.

I need a break and, above all, to get over my embarrassment. I made the biggest mistake possible: I fell in love with the man who declared, the first time he saw me—and that wasn't even on a real date, but at an obligatory meeting—that he didn't want any commitment.

After yesterday, it's as if a curtain has been pulled aside. I finally understand why I've never been able to be interested in another guy these past two years.

It was lust at first sight with that Greek ogre.

Lucky for me, I don't like him. It's only passion, physical attraction, so I'll never run the risk of loving him.

"So, how are you feeling about your debut as prima ballerina?" Powers asks, bringing me back to reality.

We're at a diner near the New York City Ballet, and from where I'm sitting, I see two of my bodyguards standing in the doorway.

I grimace in disgust, even though I know their presence is necessary. If Powers noticed my escort, he's too polite to mention it.

"Do you want a sincere answer or a cute one?"

"The truth, always," he says, smiling, before bringing his glass of orange juice to his mouth.

"It hasn't sunk in yet. I can't believe I was chosen. I've dreamed about this my whole life and now that it's happened, I haven't had time to process it. Maybe fear will catch up with me on opening day, but for now I . . ."

I stop talking when I notice Powers looking past me. A second later, when a huge hand lands on my shoulder, I know the reason for his expression.

Ares is here. I don't even need to turn around. My body recognizes him. How is that possible?

I prepare to face him, but then he leans down without any warning and kisses my mouth. It's not just a brush of lips; it's a kiss with tongue and teeth, one that brings back inappropriate memories of last night.

When we separate, I don't even know where I am anymore, every single one of my neurons trying to realign itself.

"You've been running away from me all day, baby. So I had to come and hunt for you." He turns to Powers. "My name is Ares Kostanidis, and you are?"

I'm left in disbelief when he stretches his hand towards Powers, such completely different behavior than with Otis, whom he seemed to want to kill.

"Powers Udow." My colleague accepts the hand, but a quick look at his face is enough to see that he is scared to death.

He stands up, silently, and picks up his backpack without making eye contact with me.

Excellent!

When I accepted the invitation for lunch, it didn't even cross my mind to make him a fling or anything like that—only to make friends. But honestly, I don't want to be friends with someone who runs away at the slightest hint of danger.

He says goodbye quickly, and the arrogant Greek, the last person I want to see right now, takes his place.

"Your friend must be in a hurry," he says sardonically.

"Why did you kiss me?"

"Why not?"

"Because people will think we're together." I get up too and exit the diner, leaving him to pay the bill.

I see a security guard walk towards me, but I ignore him. Luckily for me, a taxi is passing by at that very moment, and I get into it, giving the driver my address. He takes off, and when I look back, I see Ares standing on the sidewalk, shooting poison darts out of his eyes.

I haven't been in my apartment five minutes when I hear the door open.

How could he have arrived so quickly? He must have been on a motorcycle.

"Get out. You can't come in like this. It's my house."

"What the hell was that? Why did you run away? By the way, why did you run away all day?"

"I understood your message, guardian . The usual flowers and also the jewelry."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not stupid. To silence your conscience for not having visited me over the last two years, you always sent me three dozen calla lilies and a piece of jewelry. Even after everything that happened yesterday, you returned to your old routine, treating me like a child."

"I sent your favorite flowers and a piece of jewelry made just for you, as I have done over the past few years."

"What?"

"I know that you didn't open any of the ones I gave you in the past. Yesterday, when I was leaving your room, I saw all the untouched boxes inside your closet. I wanted to understand why, so I sent one more today as a test."

"A test? Exclusive jewelry? Wasn't it with my money that you bought them? I thought you had your secretary send them or something. In the romance books I've read, the arrogant tycoon doesn't even bother to buy jewelry for his exes. He orders his secretary to do it."

He doesn't say anything, and I'm not stupid: it's clear he's done that with girlfriends too.

But not with me?

I leave him alone in the living room and run to the closet. I take out all the boxes I've never opened and sit on the floor with them around me, including the one I got today.



When I start to unpack them, I feel like crying. They are all ballet-themed, but clearly unique. They also have deep blue stones, the same color as my eyes.

I look up and see him standing in the closet doorway, his jaw clenched.

We don't say anything, but I don't need words right now. The gifts say a lot because now I know he thought of me when he sent each one of them.

I stand up, and he watches me like a hunter watching his prey as he considers his next meal. There's not a hint of humor or softness in his expression, but I've just discovered that I like the danger he exudes.

Without saying anything, I throw myself into his arms. He picks me up and buries his head in the crook of my neck, biting with relative force. The sting of pain excites me.

"Don't run away from me again."

"Then make me stay," I challenge him.

Ares

### CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

"You have no idea what you're asking of me. I gave you room to grow, but you're still too young for me."

"What do you mean by 'gave me room to grow'?"

"I've never been far from you."

She swallows hard, and I think she finally understands the extent of my obsession. "I don't want another man. It can never be anyone else."

I hold her head, my hand in a tight grip on the back of her neck. "I will take everything from you."

"Do it, Ares. I want to be yours."

"Fuck!"

There's passion and fury when I kiss her now.

The agony of waiting.

Hunger.

Forced containment.

I walk Serenity out of the apartment.

"Where are we going?" she asks against my lips.

"To my house. You want to dive into my world? Let's do it right."

The only time there is any distance between us is when I open the door.

As soon as I close it behind us, after I enter with her in my arms, I take her mouth again.

In the bedroom, I stand her up, pressing her against the wall, but the height difference between us makes it impossible. Impatient, starving, I get rid of my suit blazer and dress shirt. I know I lose some buttons along the way. I throw them both at our feet and advance towards her.

Serenity is watching me with her chest heaving.

"You will never run away from me again," I repeat.

"I like being hunted. I like everything about you, and maybe I'm crazy for feeling this way."

I pick her up and hold her between my body and the wall, making her tilt her head back. "You shouldn't tell me those things, Serenity. I want to devour you whole."

I take turns kissing her mouth and her neck. The caresses are urgent, greedy, where teeth and tongue want to taste, suck, bite, mark.

Yes, I want my mark on her. I like seeing the smooth skin on her neck with soft welts from my beard.

She looks at me with doll eyes only partially open, clouded with passion.

Holding her neck with both hands, I force myself to go easier on my virgin. I slide my fingers over her shoulder, lowering one strap of her dress. I bite her there, where it meets with her neck, leaving another clue in her flesh that she is mine.

I undo the buttons as my mouth searches hers again. When I complete the task, Serenity takes my hands and I stop, waiting.

"Tell me you don't want this," I say.

"I've never wanted something so much, but I'm scared."

"I won't hurt you."

I discard her dress on the floor and lean down to kiss her breasts softly. I suck slowly, deliciously, until she is moaning against me.

I kneel down, and when I look up, Serenity looks like a goddess, half naked, sweet, waiting to be taken. An angel offering herself to the sinner.

She is so small that even as I kneel at her feet, my mouth is at the level of her abdomen. I hold her panties by the waistband and slowly remove them.

"Support your back against the wall and lean your hips forward, baby."

She complies, but I can see she is embarrassed. From this angle, she puts her pussy practically in my face, like a delicious feast.

I touch her clit with my thumb, and with two fingers, I tease the entrance to her sex.

She tries to put her hand in my hair, but I stop her.

"No. Spread them on the wall. Feel, without touching. Just receive."

Opening her for me with my thumbs, I lick her pussy while looking at her. She closes her eyes, her head falls back, and her little teeth bite her lower lip as if to hold back a cry of lust.

I suck her pussy because I'm addicted to the taste of it, the feeling of honey dripping down my chin when she gives me her first orgasm.

I stand up and brush her cheek with the back of my hand. "Open your mouth for me, Serenity." I hover the two fingers with which I penetrated her sex in front of her lips. "Suck."

"I don't . . ."

"Follow your instinct."

Her breathing is ragged, panting, but even though she is shy, she does what I ask. Her tongue slips out of her mouth, licking lightly.

"Suck it, baby and I'll teach you how to do the same with my dick. I'm dying to see that delicious mouth around me."

She parts her lips and takes more, tasting herself on my fingertips.

Before long, I am the one bewitched, trapped in the sweet seduction of my dancer.

I pick her up and take her to bed. I lay her down on the edge, but I remain standing, watching her. I remove the rest of my clothes, and she looks away.

"You don't have to feel ashamed of anything that happens between the two of us."

She nods, her cheeks red, but she props herself up on her elbows, staring at me. She tries to hide her astonishment when she sees my hard cock, pointing upwards, and if I weren't so horny, I could smile at her innocence.

I approach the bed, and Serenity tries to close her thighs, but I hold each of her feet, keeping her legs apart.

I climb onto her torso, taking care to keep one leg on each side.

I take her hand and wrap it around my cock. "Touch me."

I teach her how to rub me; the softness of her small hand, her insecurity and clumsiness, all increase my madness.

I lie on my back on the bed and pull her on top of me, inverted, her sex over my mouth, her face aligned with my cock.

"Taste me. Follow your instinct. Suck, lick."

I don't wait for her to make up her mind; I pull her hips towards my face, devouring her luscious interior, sticking my tongue deep into her virgin walls.

When I close my lips on her clit, she bends down, following her instinct and licking the swollen head of my cock.

When she sucks out the pre-cum, I almost yell with excitement at the feeling of her

hot little mouth on me.

She comes for the second time, and I drink it all up, licking her sex, thirsty for every drop of her pleasure.

I turn her body around and sit up, looking at her head between my thighs.

It's fucking erotic to watch her learn to take me, and even though she doesn't know exactly what she's doing, the excitement that awakens in me is more intense than if she were an expert sucking me.

I rest one hand on top of her head, grabbing her hair, and with the other, I caress her nipple. "Swallow as much as you can, love. Relax that delicious little mouth and let me in."

She takes more and more, and when she feels comfortable, she goes a little farther, but she chokes. She looks at me with watery eyes from the effort, and I know I need to stop or I'm going to come in her mouth.

Serenity doesn't even need to suck me to make me crazy; she only has to keep looking at me with that mixture of devil and angel in her small body and in no time, I would be lost.

I try to pull her towards me, but surprising me, she continues sucking me deeper and deeper.

I want to fill her mouth with my seed, but much more than that, I want to bury myself in her pussy, take her innocence, make her mine.

I pull her onto my lap, forcing her to just kneel.

The tip of my cock brushes her entrance, and she moves over me, causing delicious friction.

She is uninhibited in her pleasure now.

We are male and female. No rules to stop us, no world, future, or sin.

I bite her ear, pulling the lobe between my teeth, and she digs her nails into my shoulders, excited.

I massage her clit while she satisfies herself by rubbing the entrance to her pussy against the tip of my shaft.

"I'm going to make you come like this. I can't fuck you without a condom, but I need to feel you coming with me inside you."

She is ultra-sensitive, eager, naughty, and rests her hands on my shoulders to be able to move better.

I take a nipple in my mouth, and when I scratch it with my teeth, very lightly, she comes, whispering my name and swearing that she's mine.



Ares

### CHAPTER FORTY

I kiss her mouth, allowing Serenity to take her time coming down from her orgasm, and only when she opens her eyes to me do I lay her on the bed and go in search of a condom.

I roll it onto my cock under the watchful eye of my little temptation. When I get back to bed, I lie down again, pulling her over me. "Let's start like this, baby. I'm very big, and I don't want to hurt you."

I align our bodies, placing my hands on her ass cheeks, and without taking my eyes off hers, I brush my cock against her opening.

Serenity arches her body backwards like a wanton goddess, enjoying the sensations, discovering herself as a woman. She trembles all over, and her reactions to my caresses increase my desire.

I push my body up, just enough for my cock to enter the folds of her sex.

She goes down a little, but I feel how tense she is.

"I just want to make you more open to me. You are very small, love."

Her face turns the color of a ripe apple, but she nods in agreement.

"Place your hands on my chest. I'll let you take control for now."

I watch her rub my dick, moaning every time she rubs herself. I touch her clit, and the rhythm with which she rubs against me accelerates. Breathing becomes more and more difficult.

I make her lower herself until the head of my cock completely disappears inside her; When she starts begging for more, I know she's ready for me.

I reverse our positions, fitting myself between her legs with difficulty. Not even a condom can stop me from feeling her honeyed heat.

Serenity writhes under my body, and I have to stop for a few seconds to keep myself from entering her completely. I bend down to kiss her and slowly push into her again. I intensify the kiss at the same time as I push into her virgin cavity.

Her hard-nippled breasts press against mine, her shapely legs widening to accommodate me.

I move in and out, penetrating her very lightly, eventually pulling back to look at her.

I'm addicted to her reactions, fascinated by her moans, her panting, and the way she whimpers my name when she comes.

Serenity is completely at the mercy of my lust, but she is not a doll without will, a body that lets itself be used. Even in her inexperience, she makes demands too.

She pulls me forward by the shoulders to kiss me. Bite, scratch, beg.

I penetrate her a little more, and she becomes rigid, her nails digging into my ass.

With one hand, I hold hers above her head. "I won't hurt you, but you have to trust me."

She nods, and I lower my mouth to hers. I sink my tongue into the kiss and bury my cock balls-deep in her pussy.

She lets out a howl of pain into our kiss. She barely breathes, and I slide my hand between our bodies to transform suffering into pleasure.

I suck on her hard nipple while I caress her clit, my teeth pulling lightly until I feel her breathing calm down a little.

I stiffen like wood, tense, desperate with lust when I feel her dilating around me.

I know she's in pain, but even with her expression full of suffering, she's fucking beautiful.

"You are a goddess, Serenity. The most beautiful woman who ever lived."

I don't say that as an empty compliment. She really is perfect. However, my words seem to restore her confidence, making her bolder, and she cups my face, taking the initiative in the kiss.

Slowly, I test my movements, pulling out and pushing back against her center.

I hold her by the ass, angle it the way I want, my hands digging into her flesh.

Her round breasts rise and fall as I fuck her, teasing me, and I lick her hard, pink nipples begging for my tongue.

I increase my speed. She bites me, tries to escape, snakes under me.

"Too much?"

"It hurts."

"I'll make the hurt go away." I want to protect her, not because of the fucked-up guardianship agreement, but because I finally understand that from the moment I laid eyes on her, Serenity belonged to me.

Her face is bathed in sweat, but now, every time I thrust in and out, she follows me, writhing, lifting her hips to meet me, asking for more.

"What a hot pussy."

I pull out and re-enter faster and faster, and the feeling of filling her up, taking her whole, drives me crazy.

I try to control the pace of the fucking because I don't want to come before she does. I want to stay inside her tight body for hours, days.

I have never felt such intense pleasure.

I consume her mouth with my tongue, in rhythm with the joining of our sexes.

In and out, my shaft devours her pussy with agonizing urgency.

The narrow walls pull me towards them, imprisoning me.

I take her deeply, working my self-control to make the pleasure last.

Tongues attack each other in a hungry kiss; the ecstasy of complete connection elevates lust to a level I've never experienced.

For a long time, I alternate between accelerating the fucking, reaching the edge of the precipice, and retreating, delaying the final prize until the limit of pain.

The warmth of her pussy is perfect, and the scent of lust spreads throughout the room, creating a unique scent, just ours, that I'm sure I'll memorize forever.

I reach my limit when Serenity comes again, squeezing me in small convulsions.

I start fucking her hard, each pounding thrust confirming that she is mine.

I realize maybe I've gone too far when she gives me a long moan, but as I try to slow down, she begs me not to stop.

Our bodies collide, our sexes brushing wetly, slippery. Teeth, tongues, and fingers explore everything they can reach.

Her inner muscles throb around me in a warning that another orgasm is approaching.

I pull almost all the way out and come back, pumping her sex with my hard cock.

She contracts even more, and when I suck on a nipple, swirling my tongue around the hard flesh, Serenity explodes in an orgasm, her angelic face becoming the purest image of sated lust.

I feel the pressure for my climax building, my body hardening from the almost animalistic pleasure of our act.

Seconds later, I follow her, coming hard, my release so violent that for a few seconds, I'm half out of breath.

Her sex is still convulsing a minute after we both came.

I pull out of her slowly, even though it's the last thing I want. I know it's risky to stay. Even though I always have protected sex, there is no chance that Serenity uses the pill.

I get up from the bed to discard the condom, and when I lie down again, she doesn't wait for an invitation to stretch herself out over my body like a cat. She gives a little moan and then passes out in satiated languor.

I lie awake, feeling her warm, delicious body on mine, stroking her hair, watching her sleep. "What am I going to do with you, Serenity?"

I thought she was sleeping, but maybe she was just dozing, because she lifts her head to look at me. "Do you need to do something? Can't we just carry on as we are?"

"I don't work that way. I'm a planner."

"I'm not one of your companies."

"No, but you are mine."

She lays her head down on my chest again and is soon snoring, but this time, she falls into a deep sleep.

I must have fallen asleep too, but I'm a light sleeper and I wake up with the feeling that I'm being watched.

When I open my eyes, Serenity is kneeling on the bed, naked, looking at me.

"I don't want them to know about us," she says.

That was the last thing I expected her to say. "What?"

"It won't last. You said you don't stay with the same woman for more than a week. I don't want your family to find out. Seven days pass quickly."

"No."

"No?"

I'm still a little drowsy, the room is dim, but if there's one fucking certainty at this moment, it's that we won't have an expiry date.

Without answering her question, I pull her onto me, one hand on the back of her head, taking her mouth roughly.

I lift her hips and hold her sex, testing how wet it is. It soaks my hand. "Ride me."

She looks at me, confused.

"I need to fuck you, but I don't trust myself to stay in control."

She lowers her head, creating a curtain of hair to hide her face, and I think she's shy. Still, she gets up and fits her pussy onto my dick. She starts to go down slowly, and we both moan.

"Tell me if it hurts."

I hold her waist and slide my hard cock in.

She whimpers but takes me whole.

When she looks at me again, her face is pure sensuality.

I slide her down, and Serenity rests her hands on my chest, letting me fuck her deeper and deeper. I bury myself, keeping her sitting on me.

"Ahhhh . . ."

"Sway on my dick." My voice comes out rough, brutal. I pull her down tight against me. "Sway," I moan in her ear. "Give me that sweet pussy. I'm going to make you come just by being inside you, without fingering your clit."

She moves her hips in circles, initially obeying my command, but it doesn't take long for her to become crazy with lust and come inside me.

Only when I feel the warmth of her honey running down my shaft do I realize I didn't put on a condom.

I want to fill her up, make my come leak out of her pussy, but I'm not a jerk and I would never betray her trust like that.

I lay her down on the bed and pull out of her. Kneeling between her thighs, I pump my cock, squeezing my balls with one hand, the other working a rough hand job.

When my orgasm comes, I am fascinated to see the jets of semen on her breasts and abdomen. With my fingers, I spread my pleasure all over her body like a painting.

She doesn't move.

She doesn't stop looking at me.

"Don't take me too far, Ares, or I'll never be able to forget you."

"That's the idea. You are mine."



Serenity

### CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The next day

I wake up later than him.

I'm actually too embarrassed to get up, even though I know Ares is showering and I could quickly escape to my apartment. However, I really want to stay and ask what he meant by, "You are mine." The thing is, I'm scared of his answer.

What if he says: You are my ward, Serenity.

My protégé.

My favorite orphan.

Any of those would be depressing, but if I consider what he told me about not staying with the same woman for long, that's probably what I'm going to hear.

I'm getting ready to get up, wrapping the sheet around my body, when the bathroom door opens, and he appears with his hair still dripping from the shower, a tiny towel wrapped around his narrow waist.

I can't speak, too stunned by that nearly 6'6" man looking at me as if he wants me for breakfast.

"You kill me, Serenity."

"What?"

"I know what you're thinking. I want it too, but if I fuck you again, you won't be able to walk for two days. I'm not going to take it easy like I did yesterday." He lets go of the towel, letting it fall carelessly on the floor.

I swallow hard when I see that his huge sex is semi-erect.

"Choose: me or ballet?"

"My God, I always thought dancing was my life, but . . ."

He throws his head back, laughing, more handsome than any other man on the planet. Without saying anything, he climbs into bed and unravels me.

Over the next half hour, Ares gives me two orgasms with his mouth and fingers, and when I fall back drowsily against the sheets, I start to question whether it wouldn't be worth taking a vacation to live solely on sex for weeks.

"What about your performances?" he asks, lifting his face from between my legs, his lips still wet from my pleasure. The personification of sin.

"Did I say that out loud?"

He doesn't respond, just gives me a lazy smile.

"My God, I said it out loud!"

"Whatever you decide, I'm in." He lies on his back and pulls me towards him.

I didn't mean to sleep, but I know I blacked out when I wake up in a cold sweat from a nightmare. He is no longer with me.

I must have screamed because Ares enters the room looking worried.

"What happened?" he asks.

"What?"

"You were crying."

I run my hand over my face and feel it wet with tears. It takes me a while to remember. The usual nightmare. "It's a recurring dream that I've had my entire life."

He sits on the bed and pulls me into his arms. "Tell me about it."

"I'm alone in front of the full-length mirror that was in the house where I was born, in New Orleans. It was in my parents' room. I'm looking at myself, combing my hair, and then Mom and Dad appear behind me. But they don't have faces, they don't have heads, just bodies, and yet they can speak. I hear them call my name. When I told JeAnne about this dream, she told me it might be because I feel guilty about not remembering them."

He puts his hand on my head and, little by little, I calm down.

"Have you talked to anyone about it?" he asks.

"You mean . . . a therapist?"

"Yep."

"A few years after they sent me to boarding school, I went to some sessions. I don't remember much, just a woman talking to me behind closed doors at German school, when I was still very little. She gave me paper and colored pencils to draw with. But if it was therapy, it was only for a short time, and I don't think it worked, because I didn't say anything. In any case, they are just flashes of memory."

"Don't you feel like trying again?"

"Do you think I should?"

"I don't know, Serenity. I'm not the best person in the world to give advice on how to open up. On the contrary, my siblings and I grew up being told that we can never show emotion."

"Because they are men?"

"Because we are Kostanidou, Greeks, and a group of proud bastards."

I lift my face from his chest to look at him. He tried to sound light, but I'm already getting to know him a little bit, and I know Ares didn't tell me this to comfort me. He must have been indoctrinated, like me, to keep his emotions under control.

"During the first few days at school, I cried a lot because I missed home. They punished me. I soon learned to pretend everything was fine. I started to relate showing feelings to something bad." I don't like to admit it, but in a way, he gave me a clue about his past. The least I can do is give him something back in return.

"You were just a little girl."

"Yes, I know. I like to think that if I ever have children, I will never teach them that showing feelings is wrong. I don't want to create more people like me." Only after I

say that do I realize that I may have offended him too. "Pardon me. I spoke without thinking."

"I'm not sensitive, Serenity. With me, you will never need to hide what you think or feel."

I do need to hide what I feel because right now, I would like to create a law saying that you are mine.

I clear my throat and try to do the same with my brain. Despite what we just talked about, the future of our relationship is a big question mark, if there even is a relationship, and I don't want to think about that right now.

"I'm afraid of one day forgetting them. I mean, forgetting them once and for all, because at least with the photographs I can try to force the memory." I pause, remembering the last conversation with JeAnne. "Why didn't you tell me that Mr. Van Lith had passed away, Ares?"

He turns me so I'm straddling his legs. He tucks a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "Because he asked me not to."

"What?"

"Eventually, I would have. As much as I want to protect you, because I won't allow you to be hurt, I don't want to keep you in a glass jar. Pain is part of life. Wanting only happy days is unrealistic. But he was dying, and he asked me not to tell you at that time, and to be honest, I ended up forgetting. How did you know?"

"JeAnne called me."

"Did she call you to tell you about it?"

I nod. "She said she saw an article in the local newspapers about his death and that a single person was at the cemetery: you."

"How could she have known that? There were no photographers at the cemetery. My security guards always search the perimeter when I go somewhere."

"What?"

"She lied to you, Serenity. I don't know why, but JeAnne lied." He pauses. "How was she when you spoke on the phone?"

"Normal. I mean, her new normal , because even though I have no idea why, she's changed with me."

"How?"

"She's just grown more and more distant from me. Not just physically distant. I'm always the one who takes the initiative to call. It's like she's trying to cut ties."

He looks thoughtful and then kisses me on the forehead and sits me down on the bed. "Wait a second." When he returns, he has a box in his hands. "Van Lith left this here with me. It contains memories of your parents."

"Memories? And he was withholding them? Why didn't he give it to me from the beginning?"

He shrugs. "He gave the excuse that he was trying to protect you from the pain, but maybe he had just forgotten about it."

I take the square box. "What's in here?"

"Photographs, I think. Maybe letters. I didn't open it."

I set it aside.

"Aren't you going to see what's inside?"

"Not now. I'm feeling happy today. I'm afraid that seeing these mementos will bring the sadness back."

It's already evening when I return to my apartment. Ares had to go to SIN , but he said he would return in an hour.

When I open the door to my duplex, however, I am surprised to find JeAnne standing in the foyer.

"Hi. The maid let me in. I hope you don't mind."

I go to her and hug her, sighing in relief when she reciprocates. Despite our last conversation, the hug and kiss she gives me feels the same as always.

"I can't believe you came. How long can you stay?"

We walk together towards the living room.

"Until your debut. I wouldn't miss it for anything. Where were you? You spent the whole day away. I tried calling."

"My phone died. I think I need to change it. The battery dies all the time."

"You didn't answer where you were."

That irritates me, I'm not a child anymore. Any other time, I would tell the truth, but I don't feel like it, so I just say, "I left for a walk."

Before she can ask any more questions, the night shift maid enters the room. "Mrs. Villatoro is coming up."

JeAnne's expression changes instantly, and I roll my eyes.

Will they never get along?

"Be nice," I beg. "Debra has been traveling and came to help me with rehearsals for my debut."



Ares

### CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Two weeks later

“So the doctors were right?”

“Yes, the scorpion had been genetically modified. Whoever put it there didn’t want to kill her; they wanted to hurt her or scare her,” Odin responds.

“Scare her? If her body reacted badly to the poison or if she had not been rescued in time, the result would not have been just ‘a scare.’” Thinking about the mere possibility makes me want to kill someone.

“There is no doubt that this stalker is a psychopath. If what Serenity said is true, that the stalker left flowers and notes wherever she was in the world, it means he is a man with money and also knows how to sneak around, as he was never caught by her bodyguards. Like I said before, if she had told us what was happening from the beginning, we could have tracked the footage. But it’s deleted after a few months.”

“And what about camera footage at the theater in Paris? That would be the most recent. It was the last place she performed before moving back here.”

“I’ve already checked it. There was a delivery of a single rose by a courier. I tracked down the store. It was an anonymous order, made online. I entered the company’s servers to see who it came from, but the only thing I discovered was that it was made

from a coffee shop here in the United States.”

“This doesn’t make any sense.”

“It does. This guy is smart. He used the place’s Wi-Fi to avoid attracting attention, but I sent a trusted employee to check the footage. You have no idea how many people enter a coffee shop throughout the day, but he analyzed everything calmly, cross-checking data. Unfortunately, the footage from the day the rose was ordered had already been deleted. The purchase was made with a credit card stolen from a ninety-year-old widow.”

“I can’t wait to put this son of a bitch behind bars.”

“Your concern for her doesn’t seem like that of someone who’s just her guardian.”

“We are together.”

“That could be complicated by the fact that you have a legal relationship.”

“Yes, I already thought about that. The solution I found was to transfer her guardianship to you or Christos. If I gave it to any of my brothers, it would also create a delicate situation.”

“I’ll take it if you need me too,” says Odin. “Have you talked to Serenity about it?”

“I have. She needs to be involved in every decision about her future. She’s been kept inside a glass dome, overprotected, but soon she’ll be twenty-one.”

“I agree. Even a control freak like me wouldn’t raise my three children so unprepared for life. Her only finding out she was a millionaire through you is unforgivable.” He pauses. “Did you know that Serenity’s father had a partner?”

“No. I never went that deep in my investigation of her. I only focused on the moment she became an orphan and onwards.”

“Her father had a business partner, but their partnership did not end well.”

“How come?”

“They were not always rich. Serenity’s father made his fortune as a builder, but he started at the bottom. From what I could see, before becoming a millionaire, Roger Blanchet suspected that he was being robbed by his partner and put an end to the partnership.”

“Robbed?”

“Yes. It appears that the partner was embezzling part of the profits. As soon as the partnership came to an end, Serenity’s father closed a big deal in the Middle East with a sheikh and suddenly turned a local construction company into a world-renowned one.”

“Yes, I know that part, but not about the partner.”

“Like I said, the partnership was dissolved before Serenity’s father expanded the business and became rich. Long story short, the former partner did not accept the end of the partnership well. There were fights in court, and when the man, Edgar Hazen, lost the case, there was even a physical confrontation between them.”

“Fuck. Van Lith certainly knew this. Why didn’t he tell me?”

“Perhaps he believed it was not relevant.”

“But do you think differently?”

“I don’t reason like a regular person, Ares. When faced with a problem, I analyze every nuance until I find the bit that doesn’t fit the picture.”

“And you think it could be that partner who is somehow trying to harm Serenity?”

“He’s the only enemy she could have. Your girl spent practically her entire life locked away at boarding school. She said that the feeling of being watched began as soon as she left and returned to New Orleans. It’s a very short time for someone to become so intensely obsessed with her.”

“Do you think he’s the stalker, then?”

“I don’t know. Pursuing someone like that seems like the action of a younger man. I don’t have all the pieces of the puzzle yet, Ares, but you can be sure that I won’t stop until I solve this mystery. In the meantime, keep your girl under observation.”

Serenity

DEBUT NIGHT AS NEW YORK CITY BALLET PRIMA BALLERINA

I take several breaths to calm my heart.

It finally happened. I reached the top, the highest point of my dreams. I debuted as prima ballerina for the New York City Ballet.

Ares’ family just left my dressing room.

Everyone already knows about the two of us, JeAnne included, and she didn’t seem surprised. I thought, given her overprotective way of raising me, that she wouldn’t like me dating, but she just said it was nice to have someone like Mr. Kostanidis to “take care of me.”

It was a strange reaction, considering that she tried to poison me against Ares with that story about him hiding Mr. Van Lith's death from me.

In a few days, my guardianship will be transferred to Odin Lykaio, one of Ares' cousins. I don't mind. I never gave a shit about money, but I know that Ares is doing it, as he explained to me, so that there is no doubt that there is no conflict of interest in our relationship.

The only disappointment of the night was Otis, who didn't come. We haven't spoken much since I told him the truth about my relationship with Ares. He's been avoiding me.

The door opens, and the man I'm obsessed with enters the dressing room; he closes the door and leans back against it.

He looks at me, his face serious.

I know he waited for the whole family to leave, after congratulating me on my performance, so he could talk to me alone.

Little by little, I'm getting to know him. He wasn't joking when he said he'd learned not to show feelings, but if there's one thing I've learned about my Greek over the last few weeks, it's that words don't carry the same weight as actions.

He's never talked about what we have, but I feel adored every night I spend in his bed.

"I have a surprise," he says.

I'm sitting, taking off my ballet shoes, and after flexing one foot, I lift my head to look at him. "A surprise?"

“I’m going to kidnap you for twenty-four hours.”

“I . . .”

“I know. You have to rehearse. But the next performance is in five days. I want to kidnap you.”

“Even your choice of words is that of an ogre.” I smile, getting up, going to where he is, and putting my arms around his neck.

“What else would I call isolating you in the Hamptons, naked, just feeding on your body?” He lifts me into his arms, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

“That sounds like a good kidnapping.”

“Let’s go by helicopter. Twenty-four hours. No cell phones. Just the two of us.”

“It sounds like paradise.” I lift myself up a little to kiss him, but as soon as I lock our lips, the door opens.

“Oh!” Debra says, looking embarrassed. “Forgive me.”

Ares sets me down slowly. After kissing me on the mouth, he says, “You have half an hour to get ready.”

After he leaves, Debra smiles. “You are happy.”

“Yes, so much so that I feel scared.” I finish undressing, without any shame about being naked in front of her. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“So, the celebratory dinner was aborted, apparently?”

“You can bet on that. He wants to kidnap me.”

“And you’re dying to be kidnapped.”

“I can’t deny it. Have fun without me.”

Instead of the formal dress I was going to wear, since we had a reservation at a famous restaurant here in Manhattan, I go back to wearing the jeans and silk blouse that I arrived in. I pick up the pumps I left on the floor and, standing up, put one on. When I slide into the other one and put my weight on the first one, however, I let out a scream.

It takes me a few seconds to understand what happened, but when I take off my shoe and see the blood, I sit on the floor

Serenity

### CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

“Serenity?” Debra shrieks, looking at my foot, horrified.

“Someone filled my shoe with blades. Call Ares, please.”

She looks dazed as I examine my foot. There are tiny cuts all over, the kind you get from razor blades. They’re not deep cuts, but they’re bleeding a lot, and I start to cry, not because of the pain, but because I know it means I won’t dance for weeks. Maybe more than a month.

Automatically, I look back, but I know there’s no one hiding in here. Security checked the dressing room.

“Call, Ares, Debra. The person who did this could still be out there!” My voice sounds a little hysterical with panic.

She finally seems to wake up from her trance, but she doesn’t even get to the door before it opens with a bang.

“Ares . . .” I hate that my voice sounds whiny, but I break down when I see him. I show him my foot, and without saying a word, I know he understands that besides fear, the reason I’m crying is because this is going to ruin my season.

He approaches me and picks me up. He kisses my forehead and then carries me into



the hallway.

“Where are we going?”

“To the hospital, to have your foot seen to.”

“Ares!” Debra calls.

“Warn my brothers, Debra,” he orders. “Have them check all the cameras. I’m going to get her out of here.”

Ares

Hours later

“They were superficial injuries,” Zeus says, as I pace the corridor of Athanasios’s hospital.

As the family came to watch her debut, they are all with me right now.

“I checked the cameras. No strangers entered the dressing room. The only people other than our family were the mentor, Debra, and the nanny, JeAnne,” Odin says.

“JeAnne?”

“Yes.”

“But she didn’t come to the premiere. She said she was feeling ill,” I say.

Odin takes his phone out of his suit jacket and after unlocking it, accesses the photographs and videos.

Seconds later, I confirm what he said. JeAnne snuck into the dressing room.

“I want these images to be handed over to the police,” I say, distrust starting to settle inside me.

“I’ve already done that. They should be arriving at Serenity’s apartment right now to take JeAnne to the police station. She will have to give a statement.”

“Do you think it was her?” I ask.

“There is no other possible answer.”

“Why would the woman who cared for Serenity her entire life harm her by doing something like that?” Hades asks as he approaches.

“We don’t know yet,” Odin says, “but I think it was her. Ares told me that when Serenity came to New York, the excuse her nanny gave for not coming with her was that she was sick.”

“Yes. That’s what she implied, at least.”

“There is no record that she was admitted to any hospital for treatment,” says Odin. “She kept her normal routine in Louisiana before traveling here.”

“I suspected she was lying after she arrived here in New York,” I say. “She’s looking great. But even with the evidence that she was the one who put the blades in Serenity’s shoes, I still can’t understand why. Do you think it has something to do with her father’s ex-partner?”

At this point, all my brothers know about my girlfriend’s past, and like me, they are obsessed with unraveling this mystery.

“Perhaps,” Odin replies, “but why harm Serenity? Even if she hurt her, he wouldn’t gain access to her fortune. Furthermore, the man prospered anyway. He acquired his own assets. He’s rich.”

The phone rings, and when I look at the screen, I see that it’s one of my lawyers.

“Mr. Kostanidis, I was just contacted by a police detective about the incident with your . . .”

“With my girlfriend.”

“Yes. He has someone in custody, and I’d like to know if you want to watch her deposition.”

It’s standard procedure. As our name is known, when any incident is related to us, the police officers first contact our law firm.

“I’m coming to you. I’ll be at the police station in an hour. Do you think you can hold the statement until then?”

“Yes, I will find a way.”

“Did you hear that?” I ask my family when I hang up.

“Yes, and we are coming with you.”

“I need to see Serenity first.”

I go to her room, and when I get there, I see the women in my family—Zoe, Elina, Madison, Brooklyn, and Cici—as well as Debra, gathered around Serenity, who despite her sad face, seems calm.

“Could you excuse us for a moment?” I ask. They all start to leave, but I tell Debra, “Stay.”

She nods.

“Where is JeAnne?” Serenity asks as I sit on the edge of the bed.

I clench my jaw, controlling my anger. Today was supposed to be the most important day of her life. Serenity told me how she dreamed her whole life of becoming the prima ballerina of a major ballet company.

I cup her face and pull her in for a light kiss on the lips. For a few seconds, I consider hiding the truth, but then I decide it’s time for her to learn about her world and, perhaps, begin to unravel the mysteries of her past.

“In jail.”

“What?” she and Debra ask simultaneously.

“Apparently, she was the one who put the blades in your shoe.”

I push the wheelchair into the room where Serenity will watch JeAnne’s testimony. There was no way to convince her not to come, and after thinking about it, I came to the conclusion that it would be better this way.

It’s how we handle grief. You have to see the person in the coffin yourself to make sure they are gone.

Serenity manages to get up because they gave her a powerful painkiller, but she is still limping and a little dizzy.

Only my cousins, brothers, and Debra came with us, all of whom couldn't believe this shit.

We get to the living room, and almost like she did in my nightclub, when she watched the couple fucking, she puts her face against the glass. This time, however, she is shaking, broken, sad.

I position myself behind her to watch the woman who has cared for Serenity her entire life confess the truth.

She reveals how she put the blades inside the shoe and that her intention was to make it impossible for Serenity to continue performing.

When the detective asks her why she wanted to disrupt Serenity's career, however, she says she will only tell me the truth.

The deposition doesn't even last an hour, and when it ends, Serenity spins in my arms. "I want to see her."

"Baby . . ."

"I need to see her, Ares. I'll go in with you," she says. "That woman took care of me like a mother."

"She's right," Debra says. "We need to know why she did what she did."

Five minutes later, with Serenity sitting in the wheelchair again, we enter the room where JeAnne is. When she sees us, she tries to get up, but I notice that she is handcuffed to the table.

"Why?" Serenity cries.

“To protect you,” she replies, her look completely insane. “They are coming, and they will not spare you. Run away with her, Ares. Get her out of here before it’s too late.”

Ares

### CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

" They? " Serenity asks. "For God's sake, JeAnne, who are they?"

"I can't say. I tried to protect you. I don't care about myself. It's your safety I'm worried about."

She gets up from her wheelchair, and when I try to support her, she pushes my hand away. "My safety? You want to convince me that you set a trap for me, injured my feet, knowing how important this phase of my life is, thinking about my safety ?"

"It's the truth," the woman repeats, her gaze blank, almost insane. "Ares, she won't listen to me. Get her out of here."

Serenity shakes her head, pale and visibly shaken. She sits back down in the wheelchair, and without saying a word, Debra pushes her out of the room.

"Tell me who 'they' are, JeAnne," I beg, doing my best to remain calm, because even with the anger I'm feeling, I realize that the woman is in a delusional state, skating in and out of reality.

"You can't protect her from them, but you can at least try," she says.

"Stop speaking in code, damn it! You saw her grow up! Serenity trusted you, you wretch."

She stares at me in silence, and for a moment, I think she's going to reveal the truth, but then she says, "I want a lawyer."

This leaves the police with their hands tied. Everything that is said from now on, away from the presence of the lawyer she requested, will be invalid in court.

I take a step forward, unable to stop myself. "Those who love and protect don't hurt. Make whatever excuse you want for yourself, JeAnne, but you're nothing but a traitor. It doesn't matter the reason. You lied and deceived her. You hurt my woman, and you can be sure I will go to hell if necessary, but you will pay."

Two weeks later

GREECE

"Why do you always hide your feet?" I ask, in the pool on my island in Greece.

I swim to the edge of the pool where she is. Serenity has both feet in the water, hidden beneath her body.

"I'm ashamed of them. They are very ugly. I have calluses, and my nails never grow."

I didn't really pay attention to her feet the other time I took off her shoes or when she cut her feet.

"Let me see. I can't give an opinion. You always hide them from me."

"No."

"I want to see them, Serenity."



She snorts and stretches them towards me.

There are two nails just beginning to grow on the big toes—they must have fallen off before. Each has a kind of bunion on the outside, and yes, there are a lot of calluses too.

"They are very ugly," I say, kissing each one.

She shakes her head, laughing, and then comes into my arms. "I was afraid you'd lie to me or try to pretend they're beautiful. That would lower you in my opinion."

The smile dies, and her face becomes serious. I know the reason. She's thinking about JeAnne. How fake she was.

After we left the hospital that day, we needed to take several steps. The first was to meet with Serenity's agent and the board of the New York City Ballet. They already knew what happened. The police had to investigate the place, but we managed to cover up a possible scandal, and all that was reported was that Serenity needed to rest, as she was exhausted from splicing one season into another.

Fans were supportive, and she received many gifts and letters, all checked by a specialized team to see if they could find any clues as to who "they" were, as JeAnne called them.

The former nanny remained silent after her first statement, refusing to talk about who her accomplices were. It's obvious to me that what motivated her to plot against Serenity was money, but I have no idea if that was the only reason.

Neither I, my brothers, nor Odin and Christos can figure out what the ex-partner could gain from hurting Serenity, or whether the man is part of the "them" that JeAnne referred to. We have not found anything that tarnishes his reputation.

Apparently, he lives a good life. He is a regular businessman, with an unblemished reputation.

I'm not naïve. I know that the world is shit and that many of those who inhabit the planet are worthless, but even for me, a cynic, to imagine someone plotting such revenge against an orphan is a bit much.

"What are you thinking?" she asks.

"About what you said a moment ago. I've never lied to you, baby, and I don't intend to. I've omitted things, I've hidden things trying to protect you, but I've never lied."

She wraps her legs around me and rests her head on my chest. "I can't understand it, Ares. Why did she do what she did? Who are these people who want to hurt me? I sometimes think I'm dreaming. Or rather, in the middle of a nightmare."

"Did you try to remember what I asked you?"

"About my father's partner? Yes, I tried. I couldn't even connect a face to the name you gave me. Edgar Hazen. I'm sure I've never heard of him."

"Forget about it. I am investigating on several fronts. We're going to find out what the hell these bastards are up to."

"I'm afraid they'll change their minds."

"Are you referring to the management of the New York City Ballet?"

"Yes."

"It won't happen, Serenity. You received critical acclaim after your debut. It was

unique. They won't give up on you."

"I'm not going to live in hiding. When we return to the United States, I want to restart rehearsals, my routine. It's like oxygen for my lungs, Ares."

"I would never ask you to give that up. We came to Greece to heal and to protect you until we know for sure what's going on, but it didn't even occur to me to lock you in a golden cage, Serenity."

"I wouldn't mind if you were the jailer," she says, winking, and I breathe a sigh of relief at seeing her smile. Her mood has been fluctuating since we arrived, but given what's happened, she's taking everything better than I expected.

I start to climb the pool steps with her in my arms, then I set her on her feet and untie her bikini top and bottom.

Serenity doesn't try to hide. She shows herself to me, knowing how horny she makes me when she offers herself to my lust.

I get rid of my swim trunks and lie down on the sun lounger. "Come here." I reach out, and when she approaches, I pull one of her legs over the lounger, with her standing, leaving her pussy at a perfect angle for my mouth.

At the first touch of my tongue on her already wet sex, her legs lose strength, but I don't intend to torture her for long, just get her ready to ride me.

Serenity moans and runs her tongue over her bottom lip, driving me crazy. Every time we fuck, she becomes more demanding, delicious, uninhibited.

I pull her towards me, without allowing her to come, and make her straddle my hips. With both hands under her thighs, I lift her up, only to lower her a second later, little

by little, impaling her on my cock.

"Just like that, naughty girl. Get down nice and close. Sink that tight pussy onto me."

She moans as she slides down my hard length and cries out as I thrust inside, penetrating her completely.

I sit up and suck her breasts, my excitement rising to the level of passionate insanity. The connection is intense, feverish, and I fuck her hard, taking her, giving her everything.

Serenity writhes around, provocatively, deliciously.

"Fuck, baby. You are so hot, filled with my cock." I grab her ass, thrusting hard while she rides me.

I take turns sucking and biting her breasts and lips, unable to decide which I want to taste more.

I fuck her greedily, savoring the sensation of thrusting into her sweet flesh without protection.

She bounces on my lap, wanton, panting.

When I slap her ass once, twice, fucking her more roughly, she comes, screaming my name.

I increase the pace, thrusting hard, and slide my hand over to caress between the cheeks of her ass. "I'm still going to fuck you here. I want all of you, Serenity."

"I'm yours."

"That's the greatest fucking certainty in the world, hottie." I kiss her mouth, devouring her sex with my cock and lightly penetrating her virgin opening with my finger.

It doesn't take long for her to start squeezing me inside her in small contractions.

Serenity comes again, taking me with her, and I'm fascinated when I lift her up and see my semen dripping from her sex.

"You are mine. And always will be."

Serenity

### CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Weeks later

I don't know what to call this night.

A comeback?

Maybe, because my debut happened the day JeAnne used the razors to hurt me.

However, “comeback” doesn't seem appropriate.

Fresh start .

Yes, I think that’s a good name.

A new beginning in which I had to accept that the woman I loved like a mother deceived me, betrayed me, and despite saying that she did what she did to protect me, refuses to reveal the identity of my enemies.

Ares even told me that the prosecutor offered a deal, freeing her from the charges if she handed over her accomplices, but she remained silent.

When the last song of Swan Lake reaches its final chords, I feel emotional.

Everything worked out.

No one can stop me from living my life.

As the audience erupts in applause, I focus on the box on the left, where all the Kostanidou and Lykaioes have come to watch me.

Not all the people important to me are in the audience, however. My Greek, whom I can now officially call my boyfriend, since the role of guardian has been transferred, is behind the scenes, waiting for me.

It takes me a few good minutes to finish thanking the audience during the *révérence*, but as soon as the curtain closes for the final time, I run off the stage to find Ares.

Halfway across, I see the flowers thrown onto the stage by the public. It's common for people to throw roses and even teddy bears at me. But there is one flower, a red rose, with something wrapped around the stem. As I bend down to pick it up, I notice a note tied to it.

I feel my blood run cold because even before I open it, I know it's from him, my stalker.

Without thinking about what I'm doing, I return to the curtain, looking through it at the audience that is already starting to disperse. Amidst the confusion of bodies and heads in the crowded theater, I can't see anything.

I remove the note from the flower stem, and when I read it, I feel dizzy.

Your time is coming, traitor.

"Serenity?" I hear Ares calling. He's on stage now too, oblivious to the curious stares

of staff and other spectators.

"He's back." I show him the note, and immediately after reading it, he picks me up and leaves the stage with me.

We were supposed to go to a restaurant to celebrate the performance, but just like what happened at my official debut, plans need to be changed, and we end up at Eleanor's house, me still dressed in the costume I danced in.

"Come here, my child. Let's get you showered," Madison's stepmother calls to me.

Half an hour later, I'm wearing the pink dress I was supposed to wear for the restaurant celebration, but without makeup and with my hair down.

As soon as I leave the bathroom, Debra comes to meet me. "I'm sorry your return was spoiled like this. Ares' cousin Odin is already analyzing all the footage. We're going to get him."

I nod. "I think I should go home."

"No. Your night is not over yet. We have a surprise."

"Surprise?"

"Your Greek man is waiting for you downstairs, with his family."

"I don't think I'm in the mood for celebration, Debra. I don't even know why Ares brought me here."

"Don't let them take away your shine, Serenity. You were spectacular today. The main role of stalkers, people who like to cause fear and insecurity in others, is to



incite terror. I'm not saying that what happened should be ignored—Ares is handling it—but you're not going to ruin your special moment because of that motherfucker"

Despite the sadness I'm feeling, I smile. "You never swear."

"I didn't swear. I appropriately named your stalker. Now, let's go downstairs. Everyone is waiting to slice the cake."

"Cake?"

"It is already midnight. Officially, your twenty-first birthday."

"Wow, I didn't even remember."

"But I did," I hear Ares say behind me. "You can go ahead, Debra. I'll take it from here."

She smiles and goes downstairs.

"Your friend is right," he tells me.

"I know, but I'm human, Ares. I can't stop myself from feeling scared."

"And you shouldn't. Fear is a survival tool. Keeps us alert."

"What would you know about that? You're not the type to fear anything."

He pulls me into his arms and kisses the top of my head. "I have only one fear currently."

"Tell me."

His face looks tormented. "I'm afraid something will happen to you. I won't lose you, Serenity. We failed to keep you safe today. I placed a veritable army around the theater, and even so, the bastard snuck in and managed to get close to you."

"It wasn't your fault."

"How can it not be? You are my woman. My duty is to keep you protected."

"He's like a ghost. Invisible."

"For his sake, he better be. If he's flesh and blood, I won't stop until I destroy him."

Ares

### CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

"Serenity is strong as hell, considering she's only twenty-one years old," Zeus says as we watch our women talking in the winter garden of his mother-in-law's house.

It's early morning, but neither of us shows signs of tiredness.

I think everyone, men and women, are invigorated by what happened. Only Odin has left with Elina, and I know the reason. He already considers Serenity family, even more so now that he's taken over her guardianship, and my girlfriend's stalker has just become a personal problem for my cousin.

In addition to my brothers and Christos, who came with Zoe from North Carolina especially to attend Serenity's comeback, Athanasios and Eleanor's husband, Nashon, the owner of the house, are sitting with us.

"Yes, she is," I say.

"We're going to find whoever did this, Ares," Dionysus says, because my brothers know me well enough to know the importance of Serenity in my life.

The two weeks we spent in Greece were a turning point. Before we went away, we slept together every day since I took her virginity, but New York is our real world. The bubble we created on the island was what definitively showed me that I don't want her to be temporary in my life. Serenity is mine forever.

Tonight went off the rails. Nothing I planned happened. I intended to ask her to marry me. I have the ring with me, I organized every detail, but after the note incident, I couldn't push her into a decision.

I don't want her to see me only as a safe haven, although I intend to always be there for her. I want her love, her passion—the same things I feel for her—and not for her to run into my arms out of fear.

I know she loves me, but she is too overwhelmed at the moment, and this may make her confused, insecure. When she says yes to my request, I want her to feel good, happy, to know where we are going.

I never imagined I would want the whole package: wife and children.

I value family. I love my brothers, but I get bored easily and couldn't see myself in a long-term relationship.

Serenity hit me so fast that I didn't even notice when what I felt for her—lust, obsession—turned into love. The fascination of the first night I saw her, how I traveled the world without her knowing just to watch her dance, but most of all, the self-control I imposed on myself to not seduce her—when all I wanted from the moment I laid eyes on her was to bury myself in her delicious body—showed me that, for me, she was always unique.

I put her needs above mine. I protected her from myself.

"The delay in catching whoever wants to harm her is driving me crazy," I confess, forcing myself to return to reality.

"Anyone would feel the same," Athanasios says. "The thought of Brooklyn or my children being at risk, that a psychopath might threaten them, turns me into a savage

whose only obsessive thought is to destroy the enemy."

I see that Eleanor's husband is holding the photo album that my sisters-in-law, with Debra's help, put together for Serenity with images from various stages of her childhood, including those in the box that her late guardian left her.

Serenity never got around to opening the box Van Lith gave me. I've noticed that she doesn't like remembering the past. Maybe because she wasn't happy in it.

She said thank you for the gift that the women in my family had prepared, but she barely paid attention to the album, and I think it might not have been a good idea to hand it over to her today.

One by one, my brothers stand up, followed by Athanasios, leaving only me, Christos, and Eleanor's husband in the room.

Nashon flips through Serenity's album, seeming intent on each photograph.

He is an incredible human being. It doesn't matter if the conversation is about a subject that interests him or about the latest fashion show in Paris, which I highly doubt he cares about, the person speaking always receives his undivided attention, be it man, woman, or child.

"Who is this baby?" he asks, pointing to an image in the album.

I'm sitting next to him, so I walk over to check who he's talking about. When I see a couple, who I know are her parents, with a little girl less than a year old on their lap, I conclude the obvious. "My girl."

He smiles at me and shakes his head. "Impossible."

"What?"

He points to the child's little foot. "She was born with what we call clubfoot . It is a congenital condition. You see here." He shows us. "In her case, they are really crooked."

"I don't know if I understand," I say.

Christos comes to sit on the other side of him. "Where?" my cousin asks.

"Take a good look. With this condition, she would never have been able to handle the hours of training she has undergone since she was little, and for a dancer, practice makes perfect. I'm not saying that she couldn't have been a professional or classical dancer, but she could hardly have dedicated herself so intensely to training."

I feel my blood run cold. "What exactly are you trying to tell me, Nashon?"

"Wait a moment." He returns the album to the beginning and flips through the pages one by one. In only two of the images, the baby is barefoot, but even in those where she is wearing little shoes, it is clear that it is the same little girl.

"What I'm saying," he says, closing the album, "is that the girl in the photographs is not Serenity. Now, maybe you should find out who she is."

Serenity

### CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

"You're very quiet," I say as the driver takes us home.

He hasn't touched me since we got into the car, which is unusual. Ares can't seem to go long without having his hands on some part of me: neck, shoulders, hair, knees. Wherever we are, he makes me feel like I belong to him.

Today, however, it seems that an invisible barrier has formed between us.

No, not today. Only now, from the time we left Eleanor's house, because the entire time since the incident following my comeback performance, he has been nothing but passionate and protective.

Although the night was full of ups and downs, in the end, my birthday celebration was the best one yet. The girls made an album for me, with photos from my childhood—the same ones that I didn't even get to look at when Ares handed me the box that Mr. Van Lith entrusted to him. I did read the letters from my parents. They were both written in a tone of farewell, as if they knew they would die young. They made me sad, so I put the rest of the items in the box back to check later.

I feel really bad that I don't have any emotional connection to either of them. I looked at the first photo in the album that my friends put together, and it was as if they were handing me the images of a trio of strangers. Me, still a baby, in the laps of the people who gave me life.

"You didn't like the gift?" he asks, instead of responding to my statement.

"Which one?" Ares gave me a set of jewelry—earrings and a bracelet—and now that I know he's the one who chooses them, they hold a lot more weight for me.

"Everything, but the album, mainly."

I shrug. "I'm afraid you'll judge me if I give you a sincere answer."

"Say it."

"It's like looking at photographs of strangers."

"You don't have any memories of when they were alive?"

"No. My only memory, the only face I remember, is JeAnne's."

He puts his hand on my knee, and I shiver. Proof that I'm becoming dependent on his affection.

I look out the window, pretending not to notice the contact and that it doesn't shake me.

I want to get into his lap, to say that I love him, but I won't risk being rejected. I don't know what's changed, but perhaps he's finally starting to realize that it's been much longer than the amount of time he usually spends with his women and that he should put an end to us. If that's the case, I won't humiliate myself. I'll accept what he says and stay away. It will have to be like this, or I don't know how I will survive.

Ares



I open the door to my apartment and let her pass. "Do you want to go to bed?" I ask.

Maybe I shouldn't take her now but talk instead. However, how can I tell the woman I love that her entire life may have been a sham? If what Nashon said is true, she is not Serenity Clementine Blanchet; she is someone else.

But who?

Back at Eleanor's house, I gathered everyone in Madison's stepmother's library and told them about what Nashon concluded. I also called Odin. We have an intricate puzzle on our hands, and no one is better equipped than my cousin to solve it.

"I . . ."

"I need to have you, Serenity, so make a decision, or I'm going to fuck you right now, at the dinner table."

She swallows hard. "I am yours." She repeats what she has already told me several times, and each time, she achieves the same result: she breaks my madness.

I undress her in silence and, kneeling at her feet, pull down her jeans and panties, getting rid of her sandals halfway through.

I stand up, taking a step back. "I want the blouse off. Let me see what's mine."

I barely notice my clothes forming a pile on the floor. Shoes and socks are discarded too. In seconds, I'm naked, needing her, needing to possess my woman, to keep the chaos away from both of us.

I don't care who she is. I don't give a fuck where she came from. Serenity will always be mine.

I lay her down on the table and bring her legs to my shoulders. I kiss the inside of her thighs, feeling the satin skin with my fingertips. I lightly nibble her flesh, marking her with my teeth and tongue.

I knead her breasts with one hand. They are heavy with excitement. I lean over and take one in my mouth, licking and sucking.

I caress her sex, testing the moisture. Her clitoris is hard—my Serenity is crazy with lust.

I grab the sides of her waist and fit into her opening as I take her lips with mine. I slide the swollen head of my cock past her entrance, and she moans. No matter how many times I fuck her, Serenity is deliciously tight.

In one movement, I penetrate her in a deep thrust. She moans loudly, panting.

Her pussy is hot and wet, and I can't resist pounding into her hard. I ride her like an animal, the position allowing me to go very deep.

She is so wet that she soaks my balls every time I enter her body.

I increase the strength and rhythm of my thrusts. "Touch your pussy while I fuck you."

She obeys me, screaming with pleasure, and I thrust hard, without control, hammering into her sex.

Serenity tightens around me, and my cock pulses, swelling, wanting release.

I fuck her relentlessly for several minutes, bite and lick her nipples, and she starts to twitch.

I feel the orgasm approaching, like a powerful avalanche.

I grab her shoulders, levering her, pulling her towards me, pounding into her in an intense rhythm. "This little pussy was born to be fucked by my dick."

I rotate my hips, testing the spots inside her body that give her the most pleasure, teasing her.

I pull almost all the way out and make her welcome me over and over again.

She whimpers, begging to come; I give her what she wants, massaging her tight clit.

"Give me everything, baby."

She arches, calls my name, and swears her love.

I spill myself inside her, filling her with my semen, marking her inside and out.

I fall onto her body, kissing her mouth.

I don't care how many battles I have to fight . . . if I face Satan himself. No one will take her away from me. I will kill any son of a bitch who touches a strand of her hair.

Two hours later, I still hold her in my arms, in our bed.

I have just received a message from Odin, and as much as I don't want to leave Serenity, I know that it's necessary to see what my cousin wants.

I carefully slide her away from my body and settle her on the bed.

I pick up the phone and leave the room.

In the message, he says that we need to do a DNA test to be sure about Nashon's suspicions. If he's right, we'll have to find out who Serenity is and why she's taken the place of the Blanchets' real daughter.

Serenity

### CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Days later

“He’s in love,” Debra says as she helps me stretch for ballet.

“How can you be so sure?”

“He lives and breathes you, Serenity.”

“I like the sound of that.” I sigh, looking at myself in the mirror in the main studio of the dance school. “I wish I was more experienced. Maybe then I wouldn’t feel so insecure about his mood swings.”

“Welcome to the world of women in love, dear. No matter how old you are, the insecurity will be the same. Love doesn’t come with any guarantees. It is always a risk, a leap, a gamble, and that is precisely why the act of love is so exciting.”

After feeling like I was losing him, on the night of my birthday, Ares returned to his normal self. In fact, he became even more possessive.

I just want to understand if all this passion is passion in the literal sense of the word or love in the strict sense.

“Do you regret getting involved with him?”

“No. How could I, Debra? You said he lives and breathes me, and the opposite is also true. I love him, not just what we have in the bedroom but every nuance of him, even his bad temper and dominant manner.”

“There must be some biological explanation for why we women are so susceptible to ogres.”

“Was your husband like that?”

“A lot like that, but like your god of war, he loved with his soul too.”

“I don’t think he . . .”

“The fact that he hasn’t said it clearly doesn’t mean he doesn’t love you. There are men who declare themselves to their partners every five minutes and still cheat, lie, and deceive. Pay attention to his actions, Serenity. If it was only about saying the word, well, even parrots can do that.”

I must have fallen asleep. I arrived so tired from practice that I didn’t even eat; I just fell on the bed, still dressed, and passed out. I had already showered at the dance school.

As soon as I wake up, my belly makes a strange sound, a mix of rumbling and thunder, letting me know that it has been empty for too long.

I’m almost in the hallway when I see the suit Ares wore on that fateful night of my comeback performance, looking like it’s just come from the dry cleaners. Probably the maids didn’t know where to put it and left it there.

I pick it up from the armchair, but as soon as I move the packaging, a jewelry box falls to the floor.

I shake my head, thinking that with the confusion that day, he must have forgotten to give it to me along with the bracelet and earrings.

I'm about to put it back in the blazer pocket when curiosity gets the best of me and I open it. My mouth stays open. Inside, there's a solitaire diamond of at least three carats.

The shape of the jewel is unmistakable. This is not just any ring; it's an engagement ring.

Was he going to ask me to marry him?

My heart races to the point where I'm sure I'm feeling sick, but then my rational side emerges.

If he was really going to propose, what stopped him? Changed his mind?

I put the box in his suit pocket again. I feel embarrassed for going through his things. Even though he planned to give the ring to me, he didn't in the end, so I had no right to open it.

I try to reason calmly.

Of course he wouldn't have asked me to marry him that day. I was feeling overwhelmed by what had happened, and he probably decided to wait for a better time.

I'm overthinking, as always, and letting my insecurities take the lead.

With my mind filled with the conversation I had earlier with Debra, I leave the room, willing myself to stop acting like an insecure girl.

Tonight, when Ares gets home, I'm going to seduce my Greek ogre, bring him to his knees, and who knows, maybe he'll propose to me.

Smiling as I walk down the apartment hallway, I wonder if he'll ever move me in here for good. I haven't slept at home again. My place has been empty for so many days that the maid who worked for me moved up a floor, and now, she and Ares' maid take turns taking care of our things here.

As soon as I step into the living room, I hear his voice. It's not common to find him home at this time, so close to lunch. To appease my jealousy, since we started dating, he rarely stays the night at SIN . He leaves everything in the hands of his managers.

I head over to where I hear what sounds like a speakerphone conversation. I notice it comes from the library.

"Is it confirmed, then?" he asks.

The door is ajar, but I still feel uncomfortable listening to the conversation, so I prepare to head back the way I came. But then I hear a man say:

"Yes. The DNA proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that it's not her. We don't know who she is, but the woman the world knows as Serenity Clementine Blanchet, the girl whose guardian I am, is definitely not the Blanchets' daughter."

Odin.

Is the man who took over my guardianship telling Ares that I'm not Serenity? Are they crazy? It's a bad joke.

My legs are shaking to the point where I need to lean on the wall while they continue to talk.



“If it weren’t for Eleanor’s husband having discovered that imperfection on the baby’s feet when looking at the photograph that night, we would never have known the truth,” Ares says.

“Yes,” Odin agrees. “It’s obvious it was a setup. We need to find the true heir and . . .”

I don’t keep listening. I head to the bedroom, and after grabbing my wallet and phone, I go down the fire escape instead of taking the elevator. I know that at this time, the bodyguards aren’t expecting me to leave. I’ve never run away from them before, so I’m counting on the element of surprise.

I take the back exit, and within a few seconds, I find myself on the street.

The cool air in the middle of the day doesn’t calm me down. I feel sick as I try to process everything I heard.

The memories come back in full force. I never remembered my parents, I’ve never felt any bond with them, and the answer is simple: they’re not mine.

I feel my eyes filling with tears, and I walk aimlessly until I find a taxi. I ask the driver to just drive, without specifying a destination, and I close my eyes, laying my head back on the seat.

Now it’s clear why Ares didn’t ask me to marry him. He suspected that I was lying all this time, and according to that conversation with Odin, he just had his confirmation.

Ares

### CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

I should have woken her up. I know Serenity is resting in our room, but the news I just received from Odin makes a face-to-face conversation with JeAnne urgent.

She has refused to see me or anyone sent from me since the day she was arrested. However, I'm going to meet her now. I need to get answers from this unfortunate woman.

I'm going crazy. What the hell did they do with the real Serenity? And where is my girlfriend's family? I need to solve the riddle before I tell her everything.

As the driver takes me to the women's prison where JeAnne is being held, I send a message to my brothers to let them know where I'm going. The lawyers are already coming to meet me there. Whatever JeAnne says, I'll need witnesses.

I don't doubt that my brothers will arrive soon, but I can't wait for them. I urgently need to unravel this sordid plot.

I left Serenity a note saying I had been home but left for an appointment.

I need to find a way to protect her from what I know is coming. We have to find out where the rightful heir is, and when the truth comes out, my girl's world will turn upside down.

The car has barely parked at the prison when I receive almost simultaneous messages from Zeus, Hades, and Dionysus.

The three of them let me know they're coming, as I knew they would, but as much as I love my brothers, I sometimes wish they'd give me a little more room to maneuver.

I need to resolve this myself.

I get out of the car without bothering to answer them.

As soon as I enter the prison where JeAnne is incarcerated, awaiting trial, one of my lawyers calls me confirming that not only has he gotten the warden to authorize my visit, but JeAnne has agreed to see me.

I'm not anxious, but it's not my life that's at stake, it's Serenity's happiness and, above all, her mental health, so I feel like my heart is pounding inside my chest.

It takes about thirty minutes for them to instruct me on what I can and cannot do when I'm with the prisoner, and in the meantime, two of my lawyers arrive.

The three of us enter, but unlike when I last met her, at the police station, JeAnne is not handcuffed, although a guard is standing behind the chair in which she is sitting.

I am stunned when I see her. She's thinner, and her eyes are sunken. Even knowing everything she did, especially the reason she was arrested, it's hard to accept that the woman in front of me, who took care of Serenity her entire life, conspired with God knows who and possibly took her from her family, stealing part of her life.

"I know she's not who you claim," I say, because it never crossed my mind for a second that my girlfriend is involved in this conspiracy.

To my surprise, she nods in agreement. "How did you find out?"

"The baby's feet in the photographs. The Blanchet child could never have been a ballerina."

She covers her face with both hands and cries.

I don't know how long she stays with her head lying on the tabletop, crying.

"Who is she, and where is the real Serenity, JeAnne?"

"Dead."

"Fuck!" Of course I suspected that, but I had a glimmer of hope that it wasn't true. "You need to tell me everything, JeAnne. I know you love Serenity." I say this carefully, because deep down, in her twisted way, maybe she really does. After all, she claimed to have put the razors inside Serenity's shoe so that I could protect her by taking her away from the stage.

"That's why I decided to help, because I love her. But after I tell you everything, my life will be at risk. They are very powerful. What I mean to say is he is, but so is his protégé. They are true evil."

"Who are they, JeAnne, and most importantly, why did they plot something like this?"

"Mr. Edgar Hazen was a partner of Serenity's father," she begins, telling me what I already know and confirming that Odin's suspicions were correct: the damn ex-partner is the cause of all of this. "I don't know the details, but I remember that soon after the girl, the real Serenity, was born, Mr. Hazen and Mr. Blanchet broke off their friendship. I only discovered the truth recently. Roger Blanchet's wife, Leticia, had

an affair with his partner. Everyone believed that the partnership ended because Mr. Hazen was stealing from Serenity's father, and that may be partially true, I think, but I believe that what counted most was the betrayal. Mr. Hazen envied Mr. Blanchet and tried to steal everything from him: his company and his wife. Roger Blanchet realized what was happening and went his own way, separating from his former partner. Suddenly, he had everything: a wife and daughter, and he made a fortune very quickly."

I nod, starting to piece the puzzle together.

"I don't know if he was to blame for the death of my former bosses—maybe it was just an opportunity for him to get revenge. We never got to talk about it, but as soon as the Blanchets died, Mr. Hazen came up with a proposal: he would give me a million dollars if I helped him with his plan."

"And what plan are we talking about?"

"Trading the real Serenity for my niece."

"What?"

"I don't know how, but he found out I had a niece. In fact, Serenity, your girlfriend, is the daughter of a second cousin of mine, someone very poor who didn't even know who the baby's father was. This cousin of mine, Mila Lawrence, died giving birth, leaving the child in my care. Nobody knew she existed. My niece was never registered."

"Why not?"

"I could have done it, but I became attached to the child, and I was afraid that if I took her to a registry office, the social workers would be called and they would take

her away from me. She is actually two months older than the Blanchet girl."

"Continue."

"It all contributed to his plan. Mr. Van Lith had never seen Mr. Roger's daughter in person. He only met her two months after the Blanchets' death. They were similar physically. They could even have passed for sisters. He offered me the money to make the exchange, and I accepted. During this time, when her guardian didn't know her personally yet, I truly brainwashed my niece. Every day, I showed her photographs of her 'parents,' forcing memories of events that never happened, until it got to the point that she, in her childlike innocence, began to repeat them as if she had actually lived them."

"Why? Edgar Hazen is rich and powerful. Why go to the trouble of coming up with such a risky plan?"

"Because he told me he would never forgive Roger, both for stealing the woman he loved and for breaking their partnership. I don't think it was just about the money. He would need to wait a long time to get his hands on it. I think it was because even after my employers died, he wanted to show who was boss."

"How could you? Your employers' daughter was in your care, JeAnne. You had a duty to protect her!"

"You have to believe me when I say I didn't know he would hurt the child."

"I don't believe it, JeAnne. You knew he hated your boss, envied him. You were a grown woman at the time. You should have known he would hurt the girl."

"He didn't say he hurt her. He said her death was an accident. I don't even know how it happened."

I look at my lawyers, who are hanging on every word. I didn't go to law school—I'm an engineer by training—but even a layman would be able to understand that she has just declared herself an accomplice to murder.

"I would like to see Serenity," says JeAnne. "Tell her everything."

"I doubt that once she knows the truth, she will want to see you." I stand up, thinking how difficult it will be to start telling my wife this sordid story.

"Can you at least tell her that I love her?"

"That's not love, JeAnne. You may have become fond of her, but you stole her identity. You never loved her."

"She grew up in comfort that she would never have had if I hadn't accepted the deal."

"At the expense of another child's life. Can't you fucking see that?" I start walking to the door, completely disgusted.

"Ares, he has an accomplice."

I stop and stare at her. "What?"

"I haven't told the whole story yet. How do you think he intended to get his hands on her fortune? He has a grand-nephew who, at the right time, was supposed to seduce her, but you arrived on the scene and ruined all their plans. The boy is out of control. He no longer accepts orders. He is obsessed with Serenity."

"Give me his name, JeAnne."

She takes a few seconds to speak, but when she finally reveals the accomplice's

name, I know I need to act quickly. He is much closer than any of us imagined.



Ares

### CHAPTER FIFTY

I'm not surprised when, upon leaving the room, I find my brothers watching everything through the glass. Only Hades is not here with us.

I know they came to support me, but I need to find Serenity.

We don't say anything until we are outside the prison.

"If we hadn't been listening, we wouldn't have believed it. I thought I had already witnessed the worst kinds of shit in my life, but this is without doubt the most rotten story I have ever heard," Zeus says.

"Call Beau. See if he can find that son of a bitch Edgar Hazen."

"We already did," Dionysus replies.

"I need to find Serenity. You heard who Edgar's accomplice is. Have the bodyguards take care of it."

"Already done—that's why Hades left the interrogation room before you. He's on his way to our bank's headquarters. As for Serenity, she's not home. As soon as I started to see where JeAnne's confession was heading, I tried to contact her. The maid said she left around lunchtime and never came back."

"What?"

"We can try to track her cell phone through Odin, but it will take some time."

"One thing at a time. First I have to neutralize that bastard Hazen's accomplice. Ask Odin to find her in the meantime." I get in the car, and both Zeus and Dionysus dismiss their respective drivers, getting into mine as well. I tell my driver where I want him to take us, thinking about how I could have let something like this happen. How was it possible for the son of a bitch to sneak so close to us?

About half an hour later, as the driver pulls up to my destination, my cell phone starts buzzing with a message from Serenity.

Serenity: We need to talk. I'm confused. I heard you on the phone with Odin earlier today. If it's true that I'm not the Blanchet heiress, you have to believe me: I didn't know anything, Ares.

I try to call her, but it goes to voicemail. I enter my private elevator at our companies' headquarters, followed by my brothers, while typing a message to my girl.

Me: It doesn't matter who you are. You are mine. Where are you?

Serenity: On the terrace of your offices at Kostanidis Group. I needed to get some fresh air, and Elmer told me I could wait for you here.

I punch the buttons in the elevator to get it to move, but it seems absurdly slow. I feel my heart beating in my ear when I finally reach my floor.

As I go to meet her, I say all the prayers I can remember, pleading with God that it's not too late.

Serenity

Minutes before

I spent hours crying in a taxi. I asked the driver to go anywhere he wanted, and at a certain point, he asked me if I wanted him to call someone to help me calm down.

First, I felt miserable. I thought that the life I knew would change forever because I don't know who I am or whether there is anyone who cares about me, if I have a family...But as soon as I calmed down, I tried to think rationally. I've come to the conclusion that yes, I have friends: Debra, Otis, the Kostanidou, and most importantly, I have the man I love by my side.

I trust Ares. I saw the ring. He was going to ask me to marry him. I don't believe he's just going to erase me from his life because of something that I wasn't responsible for, that I had no idea had happened.

I sent a message to his phone, but it must have been off, so I came to the corporate headquarters. I called his office, but it was the assistant who answered, not the secretary. He told me that Ares was already on his way and that yes, I could wait on the terrace.

I was surprised that Ares' executive secretary wasn't at his desk. I didn't want to invade his space without permission, but Elmer was kind and made me feel very comfortable.

I had been here for five minutes when my phone vibrated with a response from Ares to my message. He said it didn't matter who I was, because I belonged to him.

He also asked me where I was, and after I answered him, he didn't send another message back, so I believe he's coming to find me.

I hear the door to the stairs that lead to the terrace open again, and I look back. I smile when I see Elmer, but his expression quickly tells me that something is wrong.

I've met him a few times before, and each time he seemed polite and harmless. Not the kind of man a woman fears having around. The look he sends me now is anything but harmless, and when I see what he has in his hands, I scream at the top of my lungs.

"It's over, Serenity. You had your chance to become my queen, but instead you decided to be a damn whore, and now you're going to die."

I back away until my back hits the wall. If he wasn't armed with a knife, I'd try to run, but I don't think I could be fast enough.

I see the door behind him open again, and I cry with relief and despair, but it's not Ares who's there. It's Hades.

"You will be arrested if you hurt me."

"No, I won't be arrested. I will fly with you from the top of the building. Let's be together forever."

"Run, Serenity," Hades says.

I don't think twice. Even though I'm scared, I sprint towards the door to call the security guards, praying that nothing happens to my brother-in-law.

Hades

He keeps the knife pointed at me, the son of a bitch, even though we both know I'm not going to back down.

I lunge forward, not giving a fuck whether he hits me. He better be precise in his strike, otherwise I'll kill him.

Using the element of surprise, I run towards him, as I did when I played football and tackled an opponent, and he makes the mistake of looking back.

It's just a few seconds, but it's enough for me to push him over the railing.

"Hades!" I hear Zeus shout behind me.

Half my body is over the railing, and I could pull Elmer back. I have him by the hand.

"You're a Kostanidis," Elmer says. "A banker, not a murderer."

"I am a Kostanidis, and I never forgive anyone who hurts my family. Die."

I let him go, and I can see his expression of disbelief as he falls. I turn my back without looking behind and go to my brother's girlfriend to check that she is safe.

Ares has her in his arms, protected as she should always be, but I notice that she has fainted. He looks at me and nods in silent communication. I know that if he had been in my place, he would have done the same.

"You let go of him," Zeus says. There is no accusation in his tone. It's an observation.

"I didn't kill him. I had a choice, and I chose to send him to hell."

Serenity

### CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Debra sits on the bed as soon as the doctor leaves. She kisses my forehead and cheek, pulling away to look at me, then pulling me back to her. It's like she needs to make sure I'm still alive.

Eleanor, Madison's stepmother, had a similar reaction. In fact, all the women in the family did.

It's been two days since everything happened. Within the first twenty-four hours, I was taken to the hospital and they drugged me. I was a little hysterical, not only because of the discovery that I wasn't the Blanchets' daughter, but also because I had finally come face-to-face with evil in its purest form.

The feeling of someone wanting to kill you is terrifying on a level that I can't even describe. I knew there was a threat hanging over me, but I never could have imagined it would be from someone as close as Elmer, Ares' assistant.

In his sick rage, he lost his life.

"I will never get tired of thanking God that you are okay," Debra repeats.

"As okay as someone without a name can be," I respond and see the sadness on each of the Kostanidou's faces.

Ares has stayed with me the whole time: in the hospital, where I spent the night in a tranquilizer-induced sleep, tormented and restless, and after we came home too.

"You have a name. I won't go into details now, as I think this is a conversation Ares wants to have with you, but I'll just tell you that it doesn't matter what those bastards did to you." She puts her hand over my heart. "You are Serenity, my pride, the best dancer today, and I have no doubt that within a few years, you will become the best of all time."

"She's right, my child," Eleanor says, sitting on the edge of the bed too. "There is no way to change the past, and the situation they involved you in is sordid, without a doubt, but it is not your responsibility."

I nod, but I'm not so sure.

"I think it's best to leave them alone now, girls. Ares and Serenity have a lot to talk about," Debra says.

Even though it's been forty-eight hours since I woke up in the hospital, Ares hasn't brought up the subject of my identity. I tried to ask questions, but he told me we would have time to clarify everything later.

Now, I'm eager to hear the truth.

"Can you call him for me?" I know he must be in the apartment library with his brothers and cousins. I learned during this crisis that the Kostanidou and the Lykaioes are like a mini army, fighting on the same front. They come together and face whatever they have to, but always together.

The women say goodbye to me, hugging and kissing me, and I head to the en suite bathroom to check my appearance. I am amazed when I see the deep dark circles

under my eyes, the result of artificial sleep caused by medication.

I turn on the shower, but before I can step under the spray, I see Ares behind me in the reflection of the shower glass.

Without saying anything, he starts to undress and then picks me up, entering the small space with me.

For several minutes, he kisses me, at first gently, but the desire escalates very quickly between us.

He makes love to me, hard and fast, and his passion and demand finally snaps me out of my daze.

Then he bathes me, taking care of every part of my body, washing my hair, wrapping me in one of the huge white, fluffy towels.

He takes me in his arms again and takes me back to the room.

"I want to know everything," I say, lying on his body, both of us naked.

He lifts me up and positions me beside him. We lie there facing each other.

His hand reaches my cheek. "Before I start telling you, I want you to know that your origins don't make the slightest difference to me. I fell in love with you the first night I saw you. There's nothing about you that I don't love, and it doesn't have anything to do with your last name or even your first name. It is your essence, Serenity. Before I met you, I never imagined myself being in a serious relationship, but even in the beginning, even when I continued to deny myself, saying that what we had was just lust, I always knew that you were the only one for me."



I feel my eyes filling with tears. I already know Ares well enough to be certain that he wouldn't judge me, that he would make sure that whatever had happened in the past, I wasn't involved.

"I love you. Forgive me for running away that day instead of waiting to come clean like an adult. I had . . ." I feel my face heat up. "I had just found the engagement ring . . . I mean, I assume it was an engagement ring, and . . ."

"Yes, it was. I intended to ask you to marry me when we got home after your comeback performance, just the two of us, but then everything happened and I thought it was better to wait. You were scared of the threat you'd received. I thought if I asked you to marry me at that time, you would accept for the wrong reasons."

"I believed that because you discovered that I wasn't the Blanchets' real daughter, you thought I was involved in the plot and had given up on me, but after driving around the city for hours, I realized that I didn't want to run away from us. If it was the end, you would have to say it in a face-to-face conversation, looking me in the eye."

"I will never give up on you, Serenity. I will tell you everything in detail, but never doubt my love."

I nod, throat tight with emotion.

After kissing me again, Ares finally begins to explain what he discovered. He is in no hurry. He tells me how he visited JeAnne in prison and she confessed everything.

They still don't know how the girl, Roger and Leticia's real daughter, died, but someone is working on it.

It's an ugly story, involving betrayal on several levels: Roger's wife cheating on him with his partner and friend. JeAnne hiding the truth of my real mother, who I now

know is called Mila Lawrence. Edgar Hazen desecrating the memory of the woman he supposedly claimed to love, Leticia, stealing her daughter from her home and doing her harm, probably taking her life, all in the name of envy, greed, and revenge.

"And what is Elmer's role in this story?"

As soon as I ran into Ares' arms that evening on the terrace of the Kostanidis Bank building, I fainted, and until now no one has mentioned the name of that horrible man to me or given me any details. I just know he passed away, but not how. Two lawyers who were introduced to me as being from the legal firm defending the Kostanidou came to see me, but they said that everything had already been handled with the assigned detectives and that I would only need to give a statement when I was feeling better.

I have no doubt that this is not standard procedure, and it was only at that point that I fully understood the power and influence of this Greek family.

"He died."

"Yes, I know. But how did it happen?"

"He fell from the terrace that day."

"I wish I could pretend to be sorry, but I can't feel sorry for him or anyone involved in this plot. Not even JeAnne. Does that make me a bad person?"

"No. That makes you human, Serenity."

"What was Elmer's role in this story?"

"He was distantly related to Edgar Hazen. I haven't been able to confirm it yet, but it

seems that his goal was to seduce you and marry you so that they could have access to your inheritance. But the plan went sideways when Elmer became obsessed with you. He stopped following orders, acting on his own, chasing you, exposing himself."

"He was completely insane."

"I think so."

"You said he wanted us to get married so he could have access to my inheritance. The plan was to kill me later, then?"

"We will never get all the answers, Serenity. How can you know what's going on in a criminal mind? JeAnne said she didn't know at first that Edgar Hazen would hurt the Blanchets' daughter. I don't believe that, but also, despite her alleged love for you, I'm sure she was aware that your life was also at risk."

I nod. "God, all this in the name of revenge and money?"

"Apparently so." He pulls me into his arms again. "The past doesn't matter. All I want is our future together. No rush or pressure. I will never let you go, Serenity. You are mine."

Ares

### CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Three Days Later

I leave the room where she is sleeping again. Serenity hasn't returned to her routine yet, and I'm starting to worry. She doesn't seem angry, only apathetic.

Yesterday, two police detectives came to take statements about the events surrounding Elmer's death, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. In the meantime, JeAnne confirmed her confession and declared herself an accomplice in the death of the real Serenity Clementine Blanchet.

I know Beau is on the hunt for Edgar Hazen, and I'm sure he'll catch him soon. I don't care what becomes of him; my only request to the King of New Orleans is that he finds the body of the child that Edgar killed. She has the right to a grave and to be remembered. Serenity asked me for this, and there is nothing I wouldn't do to give her peace.

Plus, without a body, just JeAnne's confession, I don't think there can be a conviction. She finally appears willing to pay for her crimes, but several killers have allegedly confessed to killings they didn't commit, and I doubt the state will waste taxpayer money by starting a trial based solely on a confession from a woman who has lied her entire life.

I know that that day on my office terrace, Hades purposely let Elmer fall. My brother

doesn't know the concept of the word forgiveness. I wouldn't have acted any differently. I wish I had killed Elmer with my own hands for the years he spent tormenting Serenity, for daring to have filthy thoughts about my woman.

I hear Eleanor's voice talking to the maid, and I smile at the thought that Madison's stepmother has taken it upon herself to be the family matriarch. Without any planning, through our weekly lunches, conversations, and complicity, the woman has become a type of loving glue, solidifying our family union. Since Serenity came back from the hospital, there hasn't been a day that she hasn't come to visit.

I walk to where she is, and as soon as she sees me, she opens her arms. For a long time, my brothers and I resented the concept of an older female figure because of the lies that had been made up about our mother. Eleanor came to the rescue. Reminded us that we are a unit.

"I got the phone number of a psychologist who can help her. She was highly recommended."

"Do you think that's necessary?" I'm not the type to open up, so I can't imagine how anyone could pay weekly to tell a stranger their secrets.

"I think so. She may seem fine at first, but at some point, she will break, Ares. The life she thought she knew didn't exist. Serenity only has you and ballet." She pauses. "And our family, of course. But sometimes there are things we can't share with those closest to us. We need someone from the outside, who is not emotionally involved with us, to listen to us."

I nod. "Okay. Are you going to talk to her about it, or do you want me to?"

"Don't worry. I'll talk to her," she says. "Another thing: Serenity wants to see her ex-nanny . . . I mean, her aunt . . . I don't even know what to call that unfortunate

woman. Anyway, she wants to talk to JeAnne one last time."

I don't like the idea, but I can understand the need she feels to be face-to-face with the woman who, for much of her life, was her only frame of reference for love.

I believe that somewhere in her selfish mind, JeAnne really loved her. In a twisted way, but still, it was love.

"I'll arrange that."

Beau

NEW ORLEANS

"You are fucked. I have ties to the Sicilian mafia. They owe me fucking favors. They will finish you off."

Damn, I'm getting too old for this kind of shit. That son of a bitch won't stop whining, and the only reason I don't cut out his tongue is because I need to know where he buried the girl's body.

He's resisting more than I expected. For the last four hours, I have worked on his interrogation patiently, but the unfortunate man still has hope that he will get out of here alive. It's time to show him his options.

"If you really had a serious connection with any criminal organization in my city, you would know that the Sicilians ask me for my blessing on a daily basis. Everyone here does. A tip for your next incarnation: when you make friends with someone influential, make sure you're talking to God and not His disciples. Now, no more wasting time. I'll give you a choice."

"A choice?" I can see his one good eye shine with hope. One foot is broken and sitting at a completely abnormal angle, he has no nails left, and he's lost some teeth along the way. One of his eyes is swollen and closed, and yet he still believes he will get out of here alive?

He confessed that he was the one who caused the accident that killed the Blanchets, but in a way that I can only classify as irritating, he refuses to talk about the girl's death.

"Where is Elmer?" he asks.

"In hell. Don't worry, you'll see each other soon."

"What? You said I had a choice!"

"And you have. Here's my proposal: I can end your suffering now. A single shot between the eyes and you won't even know you're no longer with us."

"I am not?—"

"Quiet, damn it!" I get closer. "You're not going to live, Edgar, no matter how much you argue. You killed a child, and I don't care whether it was an accident or not. You stole her life in more ways than one. Tell me where she is or you have my word that in the next few hours, you will beg me for death."

Five hours later, it's finally time for him to die. The son of a bitch clung to life as best he could, and his resistance surprised me. But three hours ago, Edgar revealed to me where he buried the body of the girl, and Roman just called me and said he found her.

The police will receive an anonymous tip about the location of the body, and I will call some of my contacts to make sure they don't ignore the case. The girl deserves

justice.

I head towards the tool table, and after choosing a knife, in one clean stroke, I finish the job.

I take off my gloves and leave the warehouse without looking back, leaving Seymour, Roman's right-hand man, in charge of the cleaning.

Hours later, I get home and stand in the hall, watching my children and wife.

When they notice me, they come to welcome me.

"How was your day?" Amber asks.

I kiss her. "Boring routine. I'll be right back, baby."

I pick up my phone and call Christos. I know he'll let his cousin know.

"It's done," I say.

Serenity

Two months later

I had a hard time coming to visit JeAnne. At first, I wanted to come immediately, but then I realized I couldn't. I felt too fragile, so I accepted Eleanor's suggestion and started therapy first.

I'm not feeling one hundred percent well yet. How could I? But at least, little by little, I am accepting that I wasn't responsible for what happened.



Before coming to the New Orleans prison, where JeAnne was transferred because most of her crimes were committed in Louisiana, I went to the cemetery to visit my real mother. I spent hours sitting at her tombstone, which Ares had beautified, and I told her about my entire life.

I cried and told her how much I wished I had met her and asked her not to worry, because I would be fine.

I excused myself from the ballet company. Three months was the deadline I gave myself to realign my mind, and I hoped it would be enough.

My story exploded all over the media. There was no way to stifle it. I didn't want to continue living a lie, in any case.

In this process of just telling the truth, I told Ares that I never dated Otis. He laughed, proud, arrogant, and all mine, the bastard.

I literally needed to reinvent myself. I didn't even have a real birth certificate or even a social security number. After much thought, I decided to keep my first names—Serenity Clementine—with my birth mother's last name, Lawrence.

I still want, before leaving Louisiana, to go to the grave of the girl whose life, without knowing it, I stole.

I will also give a press conference in a few days to tell my whole story, to put an end to the speculation. It was Elina, Odin's wife, who suggested that. She said that if I never spoke about it, like an elephant in the room that everyone tries to ignore, the press would, from time to time, continue to torment me.

That was also the reason I decided to visit JeAnne for the last time.

"I can come in with you," my boyfriend says.

"No. You can watch, if you want, through the glass, but I have to do this alone."

I tried to imagine what it would feel like when we finally met again, but after ten minutes of sitting across from her, it's like looking at a stranger.

Ares told me he's spiteful, that the whole family is. He confessed that he loves with the same intensity as he hates. I'm not like that. I think I have an abnormal ability to "unlove," but it doesn't turn into hatred.

I didn't know if seeing JeAnne would stir my emotions. I thought I was going to feel angry, but there's just an immense emptiness inside me.

She's been talking non-stop since I arrived. She's tried to justify her actions, toyed with my memory, remembering happy moments, and talked about my mother too.

None of this has made my heart soften like I thought it would.

"You used me."

"No, Serenity, I?—"

"You did. I was an instrument for your ambition; you created me within a lie. You planned, deceived, inserted false memories. Along with that unfortunate man, you stole the life of the Blanchets' daughter."

Edgar Hazen was never heard from again, and I have a suspicion that the Kostanidou had something to do with his disappearance, but I haven't asked Ares about it, nor will I.

"I need your forgiveness, Serenity. I know I will spend my whole life behind bars, but at least give me your forgiveness."

I stand up, still staring at her. "It's God who has to forgive you. He is the one who grants forgiveness even to people like you. As for me, I intend to forget you ever existed. If I ever forgive you, it won't be for you. It will be for myself."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm*

Ares

### CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Eight months later

GREECE

"I don't like surprises," Serenity shouts, smiling, when I carry her out of the sea on my shoulders.

I spank her ass. "Liar."

"Okay, I love surprises, but I don't want to go in to eat yet. The sea is delicious."

I turn my head and bite her hip. " You are delicious."

"So that's what you came to get me for?"

"For what ?" I ask when we arrive at the house, emphasizing the last word.

It doesn't matter that I currently know her body better than I know my own, Serenity still has a hint of a girl who is shy about saying dirty things inside her.

"You know what I mean." She rolls her eyes when I put her on her feet and hold her chin.

"No. Explain it to me. By 'that,' do you mean putting you on all fours on the edge of the bed and sticking my dick down your throat until you make me come?" She shifts her weight onto her other leg, and I know she's excited. "Or do you mean me lying down and making you ride me hard? Or maybe?—"

She doesn't let me finish, jumping into my arms.

When I catch her, she wraps her arms around my neck, her pupils dilated with excitement, licking her lips. "I can't choose just one option, so I'm going to take them all."

"You're shameless, Miss Lawrence," I say, biting her lower lip.

As always happens when I use her mother's surname to refer to her, Serenity gives me the most beautiful smile in the fucking world. "What are we waiting for, then?"

"I told you I had a surprise."

"Isn't it sex?" she asks, but her cheeks turn red.

I shake my head. "Family meeting."

"At this time of day? But it's seven in the morning in New York," she says, quickly calculating the time difference.

"Yes. Come, it won't take long."

About a week ago, Serenity wrapped up her first season at the New York City Ballet. At first, when she told me she wanted to go back, I was tense, thinking it would be too much pressure, given all the shit we'd been through.

I was wrong. Diving into dance rescued her at a speed that I don't think even the therapy she continues to do would have been able to.

We arrive in the main sitting room of my house on the island, and I see the surprise on her face when she notices the eighty-five inch TV on, with our entire family, plus Debra, appearing in small frames.

"Hi, guys," my girl says. She waves shyly, like she always does when she's exposed to too many people at the same time. It's incredible the difference between Serenity's Prima ballerina of the New York City Ballet persona and her family girl behavior.

She only wears the professional persona in her role as a public figure. Inside the house, she's one hundred percent open to me, and like the selfish fucker that I am, this makes me feel ten feet tall.

Before she can ask what's going on, I turn her to face me, and in the same movement, I kneel at her feet. I vaguely hear the women in my family say something, but my concentration is one hundred percent on her.

"I don't care what your name is," I begin, repeating what I've been telling her since we found out about the identity change. "I don't care which world you come from, what your last name is, or that you have the ugliest toes I've ever seen . . . To me, you're completely perfect. From the beginning, what caught my attention was how true, passionate, and committed you are to every little thing you do in your life. I gave you the time I thought you needed, and my brothers can testify that it was a hell of a struggle for me to control the desire to make you mine. But I can't wait any longer. Marry me, Serenity. Be my wife and the mother of my children."

Even though I didn't rehearse what to say, I practiced a mini-script of what to do , so now would be the time to give her the ring, but nothing with Serenity is predictable. My love for her doesn't follow rules, so she doesn't give me time to even pick up the

box. She throws her arms around my neck, still standing, and cries, holding on to me.

"I love you, Ares. Maybe there are some parts of me that will always be missing a piece, shards that got lost along the way. But what I feel for you is complete. You are my perfect fit. Yes, I want to be yours."

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm*

Maybe we should have waited. Somewhere, in a handbook for brides, it's probably written that you should take everything slowly: choosing the wedding venue, carefully planning the party, making sure everything will be perfect.

Ares and I, however, do not dream of perfection. We want something real.

Our love is not a flowery path, lined with impeccable flowerbeds and exquisite landscaping.

It is bumpy, with several rocks out of place, some trip hazards, and a lot of fights.

Sometimes, his arrogant way of assuming that he can and should decide everything for me makes me want to kill him.

Sometimes, his arrogant way of assuming that he can and should take care of me, protect me, and eventually, cross some boundaries, makes me love him even more.

He's not perfect. I'm not perfect. Still, we were made for each other.

I've decided on a wedding on our island—yes, he says it's ours, and I won't argue. I've learned to pick my battles.

I didn't want anything big, just the people who were by my side at the worst moments of my career. The friends that life gave me, the family that I never had.

The only family I want, because with each passing day, I've been trying hard to forget about JeAnne.



She made a deal with the prosecutor and got a relatively minor sentence considering the number of crimes she'd committed: twenty years with the possibility of parole in ten.

I don't care whether she stays behind bars forever or gets out tomorrow, because for me, she doesn't exist anymore.

There's something I remembered the other day, something I only told Ares. In researching my past, I learned that I was never registered, but I don't remember ever being called by any name other than . I asked Ares to have the lawyer visit her and ask her if I had another first name, even if it was never registered.

Her response was that she'd always called me by the same name as her boss's daughter because she thought we looked alike. Even without registration, I was already .

When the lawyer told us what he had discovered, Ares and I came to the same conclusion: from the beginning, she was in cahoots with Edgar Hazen. Perhaps the exchange was even her idea.

We will never know, and now, it doesn't make any difference anymore.

I hear a knock on the door, and I smile before it opens, because I know who it is. My friends and the kids just left, so it could only be Hades.

"Ready?"

I nod, go over to where he is, and hug him. He goes rigid, and my heart cracks with sadness for my brother-in-law who doesn't allow himself to "feel."

"I will never understand why you chose me to walk you down the aisle, ."

"Because when I needed you, along with your brother, you were my hero, Hades."

After the episode on the Kostanidis Group rooftop, which resulted in Elmer's death, Hades and I became close. At my insistence, of course.

I've noticed that even when he's with his family, he seems lonely, and I know too much about loneliness to ignore his.

"You are ours to protect," he says.

"And to love?"

He doesn't answer me. He offers his arm and leaves the suite with me, heading to the altar set up on the beach, to hand me over to his brother.

I see Ares approaching, and as always happens, my heart skips a beat. The certainty that within a few minutes my "forever" will begin leaves my body shaking in anticipation.

Before my fiancé reaches us, Hades bends down and says, "I'm not capable of loving, ."

"You are wrong. You have a lot of love inside you, and one day, a lucky person will receive it."

He doesn't answer. With his usual serious face, he kisses my forehead and hands me over to his brother.

"Ready to be my owner?" I joke, because it costs nothing to tease my bossy Greek.

But Ares, being who he is, doesn't let it go. "Ready to make my ownership official.

You were always mine."

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm*

She wanted to stay on the island.

We could travel anywhere on the planet, but Serenity chose Greece for our honeymoon. She told me that her best memories are here.

As I watch her come out the bathroom and walk towards me, completely naked, I wonder if I will ever be able to react less voraciously to the sight of my wife ready to give herself to me.

I get up, meeting her halfway, the desire already completely out of control, like an avalanche that can't be stopped. My body is tense, the muscles transmuted into steel.

I cup her face and run my thumb across her lips. Serenity separates them, taking my thumb between her teeth, licking the tip, teasing.

I reach into her hair, twisting it in my fist; keeping her still, I attack her lips.

Small fingers touch my jaw; breasts rub against me.

I slide my other hand up her ass, groping her pussy from behind. I brush her entrance, and she gasps, moans, and when I take her mouth, she responds to my kiss eagerly.

"You are delicious. I'll fuck you like you deserve the second time, but now, I want to fuck you hard." I take her to the bed and make her bend over, her face on the mattress, her ass facing me.

I squat down and suck from her pussy to her ass, which I have taken countless times

and which gives me as much pleasure as her sex.

"I'm going to make you come in my mouth. It's going to be fast and intense, love."

I hold her by the hips, and her scent is, in itself, an aphrodisiac. Sweet, soggy pussy.

I plunge my face into her sex, smearing myself with her lust. When I catch her clit between my teeth, she gasps in a moan of pleasure, throbbing against my lips, climaxing intensely.

"So delicious. You're ready to take me now."

I stand up, and with my legs, I force her to separate her thighs. Standing up, I hold her face against the mattress and thrust balls-deep into her tight pussy.

I see her hands grip the sheet tightly every time I enter her in a deep, rhythmic lunge.

"I'm crazy about you, Serenity."

"And I'm crazy about you, husband."

Hearing her use my newly acquired title for the first time makes me feel like a Neanderthal.

I hold her hips and thrust inside in quick strokes.

She screams and clenches around me.

Moving my hand beneath her, I spread her folds, devoting myself to her sensitive clit.

"Oh . . ."

"Damn, you're horny." I grab a handful of her hair without stopping.

The fuck is dirty and maybe a little rough for a wedding night, but she begs for more.

I pull back, exiting completely, and dive back in, hammering faster and faster, making my way inside her body several times.

I slide into her pussy, fucking her mercilessly. I feel small spasms around my shaft.  
"Come with me, naughty girl."

I continuously massage her clit with my middle finger, delighting in each thrust inside her body.

The contractions increase, and my demand becomes animalistic.

Seconds later, she moans and forces her body forward, coming.

I pump into her a few more times, and then I reach my limit.

I hold her by her hips and come, filling her with my semen, but it's not enough, so I slide my cock out and rub myself, causing another jet of come to spread across her ass cheeks.

I throw myself onto the bed and pull her with me, laying her on top of my body. "I love you, Serenity Kostanidis. Always and forever."

"I love you, and I'm crazy about you, Kostanidis. I will be yours until my last breath."

Ten years later

Just like the first time I saw her dance, I am fascinated by the sight of my Serenity closing the season with Sleeping Beauty .

The girl who was once an up-and-coming dancer is now the absolute queen of stages around the world.

But it's not just on stage that my Serenity commands the show, mesmerizing her spectators. She reigns in our lives too: mother, wife, lover, friend. She is the complete package in one person.

The girl who had her story stolen is now the master of her own destiny.

I come out from behind the scenes with my two children in my arms, ready to meet our muse. Serenity keeps me, Hunter, and Becker completely at her feet. Soon, our family will expand with the arrival of a girl, Liz, and that is why my wife made the decision to end her career. Today is not only the end of the season—it is the crowning achievement of a successful journey.

“Mommy is crying,” our oldest son, Hunter, says. He is six years old and still cannot distinguish tears of joy from tears of sadness.

"She's thrilled."

"Because she won't dance anymore?"

"No, your mother will never stop dancing. She is our personal dancer. Mom is crying with happiness." And I know it's true. It wasn't an impulsive decision. Serenity decided that she wanted to stop, or rather change, her contribution to the world of ballet, in a conscious way.

Like Debra, she wants to teach so she can spend more time with us. No matter how much I try to keep up with her, children need routine, and with each separation, she suffers to the point of not being able to concentrate as she should.

What was once her absolute passion became a source of anguish.

I saw it happen. I knew the exact moment she realized she was being torn in two, and I also guessed, before she told me, what her decision would be.

When she sees us, she comes running towards us. We—the three men in her life—give her a triple hug.

"Don't cry, Mommy," Becker says, kissing her cheek.

"They're worried," I say.

"Mom is crying because she had to be very brave," I say. I hand the kids over to the nannies and pull Serenity into my arms. "You might want to come back in the future, when Liz is older."

"No, . I've already lived my dream on stage. Now I want to create memories. Living my dream as a wife and mother to the fullest."