



Split

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Im not sure what's real anymore.

One minute, I'm living a perfectly mundane, comfortable life, and the next, I'm being married off to a man I've never met in a quickie ceremony, then whisked away to live in his creepy old mansion on a secluded estate.

My new husband is dangerous and unpredictable. Sometimes he's calm, and sometimes he's chaos. It's like his personality is fractured in two halves; I never know which side of him I'm going to get, and the constant looking over my shoulder is starting to take its toll.

Secrets lurk around every corner in the manor, and the more I try to uncover them, the deeper they bury themselves. I'm not sure if this place is haunted by the dead or the living, and I'm beginning to feel like I'm going a little crazy. It isn't long before I find myself embroiled in a twisted game of cat-and-mouse with the devil I married, and as I unlock the secrets of my new home, it becomes clear that if the patterns of the past repeat themselves, I won't be making it out of here alive.

Total Pages (Source): 36

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PROLOGUE

“ E liza...”

The deep, haunting voice echoes through the stone tunnel as I run faster, bare feet slapping against the cold slab underfoot. It’s so dark down here that I can barely make out anything in front of me, chest heaving with exertion and throat raw from my ragged breathing.

“ Eliza ...”

I skid to a stop as I hear my name called again, this time seemingly from somewhere ahead instead of behind.

Biting my lip to stifle a whimper, I run my palms over the damp stone walls surrounding me, desperately feeling around for an opening. They slip and slide against the rough surface, both from the moisture on the rock and the blood on my hands.

Blood that isn’t my own.

My fingers claw against the craggy wall as I frantically search for a way out. These tunnels are a labyrinth; a maze designed to disorient. A game.

The rock suddenly gives beneath my hands as I locate an opening in the roughly hewn stone, tripping forward into the space it creates. My knees bang against the floor as I go down hard, a pained cry escaping my lips on impact. I slap a hand over

my mouth to suppress the sound, mentally cursing myself for giving up my location by making a noise.

“There isn’t anywhere you can run to that I won’t find you, wife ,” the disembodied voice mocks, echoing in the space around me like a death knell.

He sounds closer now. Too close.

I shove up to my feet, springing forward into the darkness at a full sprint. My panted breaths fog the air as they burst from my lips, my exposed arms covered with goosebumps. In the distance, there’s a hazy glow of light, and I can barely make out the rough edge of another opening– another turn.

I take it at full speed, immediately regretting my choice when I slam into a wall of stone, barely throwing my hands up in time to brace myself.

A fake opening.

A false hope.

As I stumble backwards, stunned and disoriented, a pair of strong arms suddenly wrap around my waist from behind, hauling me back against a muscular chest.

A scream tears from my throat as my feet scrabble for purchase against the cold floor, my fingernails digging into the flesh of the arms banded around my waist.

My captor leans down, his heavy breaths rustling my hair and his lips brushing the shell of my ear as he whispers, “Til death do us part, remember?”

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“My son should be along any minute now,” Magnus says, tapping his index finger against the mahogany tabletop. It’s the only outward sign of his agitation at his son’s tardiness—his shoulders are relaxed, his lips drawn in an easy smile. Not a single gray hair is out of place atop his head. Nonetheless, that finger just keeps tap-tap-tapping, making my own anxiety spike.

My knee jumps beneath the table, falling into rhythm with the incessant tapping as I wring my hands nervously in my lap, glancing toward the closed door of the dining room for what feels like the hundredth time.

“We’re in no rush,” my father placates, beaming a friendly smile at the man seated across the table. His hand lands on my bouncing knee, squeezing it painfully in a signal for me to be still. I barely conceal my wince at the sting of his fingertips digging into my flesh, my back going ramrod straight against the antique dining chair.

All three of us perk up at the sound of footsteps against the hardwood floor in the hall, looking to the door as the knob turns with a creak before it’s thrust open and a man strides through.

My breath catches in my throat at the sight of him—because he’s simultaneously the most handsome and terrifying person I’ve ever laid eyes on, both everything and nothing like I expected.

He’s in his late twenties or early thirties; tall and broad-shouldered, outfitted in a

black suit that's perfectly tailored to fit him like a second skin. The charcoal gray dress shirt beneath it is neatly pressed, the top button undone so a hint of his tanned chest peeks from the collar. Prominent cheekbones and a sharp jawline accentuate the symmetry of his frighteningly gorgeous face, and, like his father, not a single hair on his head is out of place. Though where Magnus' is gray, his is thick and inky black.

A pair of striking green eyes meet my own as he saunters into the room with confidence, the soles of his dress shoes clipping against the hardwood floor. He comes to a stop at the chair across from me and immediately drops his gaze from my face to tour my body— or what he can see of it, from where I'm sitting.

"This is my son, Roman," Magnus says by way of introduction, chest puffing out with pride as he gestures to the dashing stranger.

My father's grip on my knee tightens in a silent signal for me to play my part. I flinch at the pain of his grasp, jolting to my feet to introduce myself.

"Nice to meet you," I say, my throat so tight that my voice sounds shrill. "I'm Eliza."

Roman swipes a hand over his chin as he continues his perusal, giving me a slow once-over and assessing me with scrutiny. The silence in the room hangs heavy, and I do my best not to squirm beneath the intensity of his cold, soulless stare.

He doesn't say hello back or give me any sort of greeting. When his eyes slowly traverse up to meet my own once more, he just gives me a shallow nod.

"I approve," he announces, the deep timbre of his voice echoing through the dining room and sending a chill skittering up my spine. With that simple statement, he drops into his seat at the table, picking up the cloth napkin, fanning it out, and setting it on his lap. "Should we do it this afternoon?"

My mouth falls agape, shock and horror gripping me. I can't believe he's being so cavalier about this, like he's simply trading stock rather than taking a wife.

"I'll see if Father James is available," Magnus replies eagerly, rising from his chair and buttoning his suit jacket. "Victor, shall we give these two some privacy?"

"Absolutely," my father agrees happily. He stands and takes my hand, playing the role of the doting father and leaning in like he's going to kiss my cheek. Instead, he squeezes my hand tightly in his grip, the bones of my knuckles grinding together as I bite my lip to stifle a whimper. "Behave," he hisses in my ear before brushing his lips against my cheek, abruptly releasing my hand, and turning to follow Magnus out of the room.

"I have to admit, I was pleasantly surprised when you came to me with this," Magnus comments to my father as he pulls the door open and steps through. "I'd thought you already struck a deal with Ilya Belov."

"All deals are up for negotiation, and you happened to outbid him," my father responds diplomatically, following him out.

My hands clench into fists at my sides.

The door swings closed behind them and then it's just me and Roman, alone in the dining room with four gorgeous plates of chicken kiev and roast vegetables spread out on the table. The older men's meals remain untouched while Roman picks up his silverware and begins cutting into his chicken.

I sink back into my chair across from him, smoothing down the front of my dress and lifting my napkin to place it on my lap. The dining room is silent save for the scrape of Roman's silverware against the plate as he carves off a piece of chicken, bringing his fork to his mouth to take a bite.

“So, um, this is a little weird, huh?” I ask, chuckling uncomfortably as I pick up my own silverware.

He doesn’t even look up. Roman just finishes chewing, swallows, and slices off another piece of meat.

My own stomach is painfully empty, and sitting in this room with a plate of food in front of me for the last twenty minutes was akin to torture. I delicately cut into a green bean, spearing a tiny piece with my fork and bringing it to my mouth.

It tastes like heaven. Buttery and fresh, with the perfect amount of seasoning. I chew it slowly, minding my table manners rather than wolfing down the meal in front of me like I really want to.

After I swallow the bite, I decide to make another attempt at conversation. “So, do you live nearby, or...?”

I flinch as he drops his fork to his plate with a heavy clatter, his emerald eyes darting up to meet mine.

“Do I look like the sort of man who would have any trouble getting a woman on my own?”

My mouth drops open in shock as I stare back at him, wondering if it’s a trick question. But he doesn’t elaborate further, and every tense beat of silence makes me grow increasingly uncomfortable as his gaze remains fixed on mine.

“No,” I finally respond.

He purses his lips, tilting his head. “So do you know why I agreed to this arrangement?”

“I... I’m not sure,” I stammer, my knee starting to bounce beneath the table again anxiously. “Alliances? Power?”

He lifts his knife, pointing the tip in my direction. “Because women in this life know their role. To be seen and not heard.”

Roman stares at me for a moment longer, as if to make sure his message sinks in. Then he picks up his fork, resuming eating his lunch.

I’ve lost my appetite.

Still, I pick up my own fork, pushing a green bean around my plate idly while I sneak another glance at the man seated across from me through my eyelashes.

He doesn’t look back.

He doesn’t speak again.

He just keeps eating his food, as if I’m not even in the room.

I’m not sure how much time passes. It can only be ten minutes or so, but it feels like hours. I nibble on another green bean, then pick up my water glass, wetting my parched throat with a sip.

Finally, the dining room door opens again and Magnus strides in with my father in tow, both looking positively gleeful.

“Father James just arrived,” Magnus provides.

“Excellent,” Roman replies with a nod, lifting his napkin from his lap and wiping the corner of his mouth. He pushes his chair back, the wooden legs screeching against the

floorboards. “In the office, then?”

“What? Now?” I blurt, my panicked gaze darting between my husband-to-be and my father.

The latter shoots me a glare of disapproval and I snap my mouth closed, wishing the ground would just open up beneath my feet and swallow me whole.

This was supposed to be a simple meeting; an introduction to see if Magnus’ son was interested in taking me as his wife. They’re not really expecting us to take our vows right now, are they?

“Come, Eliza,” My father instructs, his sharp tone brokering no room for argument.

I slide my chair back and rise to my feet, smoothing down the front of my silk dress. It’s fitting that I wore black today. This feels more like a funeral than a wedding.

My knees wobble as I cross the room, my hand shaking as I place it in my father’s outstretched palm.

I don’t want to go through with this, but being damned to a life of misery is my penance, isn’t it? I behaved badly, falling into bed with the first man who gave me a crumb of his attention, much to my father’s embarrassment. No daughter of his should be fraternizing with the help. No daughter of an organized crime family should dare to think she has free will.

The walk through the darkened hallways to Magnus’ office feels like a march to my own execution. I know nothing about Roman Volkov; even less about the business he’s embroiled in with my father. All I do know is that he’s high-ranking in the Bratva and with this union, I’m doomed to a life marred with violence and heartache until the day I draw my last breath, just as my mother was.

I watched her grieve a series of tragedies– the loss of her brother, the loss of her father– before a tragic accident of her own took her from me when I was nine. I narrowly escaped my own death that day. She pushed me from the wreckage of our car before it became fully engulfed in flames, but her screams still haunt me.

The nasty burn scar covering my left bicep is an ever-present reminder of the accident and the reason I always wear sleeves. The sight of it triggers my father, so I've learned to cover up to appease my only remaining relative. I tried wearing something sleeveless to this meeting today just to spite him, but he took one look at me, wrinkled his nose in disgust, and ordered me to change. He doesn't want my suitor to see that he's peddling damaged goods, after all.

What will Roman think when he takes me to bed and I don't bleed like a virgin?

I suppose it'll be too late at that point. Apparently, we're doing this right now, in a rushed ceremony in a damned office . It isn't exactly the fairytale wedding most little girls dream of.

Not that I ever allowed myself to have those dreams.

Magnus and Roman walk side by side ahead of us, both their figures looming large in the hallway and eating up the width of it. My father's hand is still gripped securely around mine, as if he's afraid I'll try to run.

Where would I go?

I resigned myself to this fate the moment I was caught with Wesley, a member of our household staff. My father put a pistol to his head and threatened to decorate the walls with his brain matter if I didn't obey, so here I am, selling my soul because I dared to step a toe over the line. Because I was foolish enough to act on my own selfish impulses.

We're led into a large office at the back of the house, the side walls lined with dark wooden bookcases and the rear wall adorned with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the sprawling gardens of the estate. It would almost be picturesque if it wasn't for the aged priest standing in front of them, holding a bible in his hands and poised to sentence me to an eternity of suffering.

I stumble a step and my father squeezes my hand so tightly in his grip that my bones feel as if they could shatter. He darts me a warning glare— as if I need it— then relinquishes his grasp, nudging me to join Roman in standing before the priest.

The old man cracks a smile, flashing his yellowed teeth as his gaze slides from me to my betrothed. “Do you want the full version, or...?”

“Just make it quick,” Roman snaps, straightening his shirt cuffs impatiently.

The priest nods, clearing his throat and tipping his head down to read from the book in his hands, his raspy voice wavering. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today...”

I feel like I disassociate from my body as he speaks. The only thing I can hear is the blood rushing to my ears; the only thing I can feel is the erratic pounding of my own heart. It isn't until I find the priest looking to me expectantly that I come back into myself, right as he speaks the last line: ‘til death do you part . My tongue feels like it's stuck in molasses as my mouth moves to form the words, “I do.”

“Do you have rings?” the priest asks Roman.

He waves him off dismissively. “We'll get them later.”

The old man nods uncertainly, snapping his book closed. “Then I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

He doesn't tell Roman to kiss his bride, and I'm glad for it. With the way bile is currently crawling up my throat, I'd probably vomit all over his shiny Italian loafers.

Magnus approaches with a piece of paper, borrowing the priest's bible for backing so we can scrawl our signatures on the marriage license. The ink hasn't even dried before Roman abruptly turns on a heel, stalking toward the door.

"Let's go," he orders gruffly.

I stand there frozen for a moment, gawking after him.

Go where?

I turn to my father, the question on the tip of my tongue, but he just impatiently gestures for me to follow my new husband, mouthing the word 'GO'.

So, I do. My movements are stiff as I follow the sound of Roman's retreating footsteps out into the hall, trailing behind him through the house to the foyer, then outside to a black town car parked at the curb. A driver is there holding the door open for us, and Roman ducks in first, sliding all the way to the other side and pulling his phone out of his pocket.

I take a deep breath as I slip onto the cold leather seat, casting a nervous glance Roman's way. The windows of the town car are blacked out, the light of his phone screen illuminating his face in an eerie glow. The door closes behind me, and moments later, the driver takes his seat up front, rolling up the partition to conceal himself from sight.

I flinch when the vehicle lurches forward, glancing out the darkened window as we pull away from the circle drive. I don't dare to speak. I just watch out the window, memorizing the route we take while I fantasize about escaping this mess I've found

myself in.

Not that I'd have anywhere to run to.

I can't return to my father's house. I have no money, nothing of my own. I could try to contact Wesley, but even if he did want to escape with me, we'd be doomed to a life on the run, constantly looking over our shoulders.

The only thing left to do is accept my fate and hope that my eventual death will be a quick one.

My mind slips away to a dark place as we travel, full of macabre memories and horrific imaginings of what lies ahead. After what feels like forever, the car finally turns up a long driveway framed by tall trees on either side. I look ahead expectantly, but I don't see a house— it's just an endless driveway that seems to go on for miles until finally, I make out the silhouette of a large castle-like building emerging ahead. I suck in a sharp breath through my teeth, knee bouncing anxiously.

The driver pulls up in the shadow of the crumbling old mansion, shifting the car in park, getting out, and coming around to open the door. Only then does Roman look up from his phone, turning his attention to me for the first time since we left his father's house.

"I'll arrange to have your things delivered this afternoon," he states.

I nod, shuffling out of the back seat and rising to stand outside the car. I pause when I realize Roman hasn't made any move to follow, glancing back in at him.

"You're not coming?" I ask warily.

He frowns, the muscle in his jaw feathering in irritation. "I have somewhere to be."

Before I can ask another question, Roman nods to the driver, who closes the car door to seal him off from me.

Drawing a shuddering breath, I turn to stare up at the ghoulish stone facade of the mansion, a deep sense of foreboding settling over me.

The driver steps up beside me, tipping his head toward the oversized front door. “Welcome home.”

I feel like I've just been dropped into some sort of gothic horror movie. It hasn't even been forty-eight hours since my father informed me that he'd brokered an arranged marriage with the son of Magnus Volkov, a long-time business associate of his who I'd only met a few times in passing, and now I'm standing at the threshold of a creepy, haunted looking castle, staring into the face of yet another stranger.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Volkov," the woman at the door greets, stepping aside to grant me entry. She's middle-aged, dressed in a conservative black dress and matching tights, her dark hair pulled back in a tidy bun at the base of her neck and her eyes crinkling at the corners as she offers me a tight-lipped smile.

Shoring up my courage, I step inside, glancing around the expansive foyer.

I have to admit, the inside of the house is more clean and modern than I expected based on how the outside looks— though the dark, gothic vibe carries through. The black marble floors beneath my feet are perfectly polished, the black crystal chandelier dangling above my head sparkling. Portraits in thick antique frames adorn the walls, and the grand staircase before me is made up of the same marble as the floors, black spindles curving with the banister that leads up to the second floor.

"Feel free to have a look around," the woman says as she swings the heavy wooden door closed behind me, clicking the lock firmly into place. "Mr. Volkov instructed me to let you have the run of the manor, so long as you stay out of the east wing upstairs. That's his space and he values his privacy. The west wing is yours, and I can show you to your bedroom, if you'd like."

I spin around to face her, forcing a smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes. "Thank you..." I trail off, hoping she'll pick up on the questioning inflection in my tone and provide her name, but she doesn't. She just stares back at me, blinking her dark, beady eyes. "What's your name?" I finally ask after the awkward pause that ensues.

"Clara, ma'am."

"Thanks, Clara. You can call me Eliza."

"I... I'd rather not, ma'am," she mumbles, her gaze fluttering downward. "Mr. Volkov wouldn't like that."

I smile, nudging her with an elbow. "Well, Mister Volkov doesn't make all the rules anymore, does he?"

Her brown eyes dart up to meet mine again. "In this house he does," she deadpans.

I stare back at her, unsure how to reply to that. Growing up beneath my father's thumb, our household staff was at least warm and friendly towards me. In a lot of ways, they were more like family to me than my own father was. I'd hoped that would be the case here, but from the vibe Clara is putting off, I doubt we'll be swapping gossip over afternoon tea anytime soon.

"Come, I'll show you to your room," she offers, stepping past me to ascend the staircase, her Mary Janes clicking against the marble tiles underfoot. They're also black, like everything else in sight.

The house is eerily quiet as we make our way upstairs, following the split in the staircase to the left. As Clara previously indicated, the second level appears to be divided into two wings, meaning everything to the right is off-limits.

For now, at least.

I've never been a big fan of rules.

She takes me down the long hallway of the west wing, stopping short at a large set of double doors and brandishing a key from her apron to unlock them.

"Where are all the other staff?" I ask, glancing around as Clara fits the brass key in the lock and turns it. My father's house was never this quiet— the hired help always kept things feeling lively.

"It's just me here in the house, ma'am," she replies, slipping the key back into her pocket. "Mr. Volkov doesn't keep a full staff anymore." Turning the knob, she slams a shoulder against the door and it begrudgingly creaks open, flooding the hallway with light. She steps inside and I follow, pausing in the doorway to draw a short gasp.

This room is nothing like the rest of the house. Where everything else has a dark, ominous feel, this room is light and airy, with floor-to-ceiling windows running the length of the entire back wall. A set of French doors is in the center, leading out to a wide stone balcony that overlooks the grounds. I'm immediately drawn to them, crossing the enormous room to gaze out at the sprawling property below.

There's nothing but grass and trees as far as the eye can see. The lawn is perfectly manicured, giving way to a thick tangle of forest beyond. This place is definitely remote, far away from city lights and prying eyes. A groundskeeper with a head of thinning gray hair is clipping the tall hedges on the far side of the property, and... wait, is that...?

"Does he have a dog?" I ask excitedly, lifting a hand to shade my eyes from the sun and squinting at the large black animal trotting along the border of the lawn.

“Two,” Clara provides, pulling open the double doors to the walk-in closet. “You’d best keep your distance from them, though. They’re not pets, they’re trained to guard the property.”

As I watch the animal run around, sniffing the earth, my lips spread into the first genuine smile I’ve managed all day. My father never allowed me to have pets, but I’ve always had a deep love for animals. “I’ll bet I could win them over with some treats,” I muse.

“The dogs are on a strict diet.”

I turn away from the window, sighing heavily as I fold my arms across my chest. “Is there anything that isn’t off-limits around here?”

Clara gives me a strange look, then disappears inside the closet, reappearing a few minutes later with several hangers in her grasp. “You’ll be having dinner with Mr. Volkov this evening in the dining room, seven-thirty sharp,” she supplies, crossing the room to lay the garments out on the bed. “He’d prefer that you wear red.”

I watch as she carefully lays three choices atop the plush goose down comforter, each dress more exquisite than the last. The crimson fabric stands out in stark contrast to the white bed linens, and though the gowns are undeniably beautiful, the fact that my new husband thinks he can dictate my wardrobe sets my teeth on edge.

Fuck him, I’m wearing black. As far as I’m concerned, I’m still at my funeral.

“I’ll be in around six-thirty to help you get ready,” Clara says, thoughtfully smoothing the fabric of each dress before turning back around to face me.

“No need, I can get ready myself,” I grumble bitterly.

“Erm... are you sure, ma’am?” she asks with a wince. “I know what Mr. Volkov prefers...”

“Yes, I’m sure,” I cut in, growing increasingly annoyed by the second.

Clara nods obediently, clasping her hands tightly in front of her. “Okay,” she relents, giving me a quick once-over. “Hair down. Not too much makeup. Red lips.”

My mouth falls agape.

I’m not sure what I expected from this arranged marriage, but it definitely wasn’t to be dressed up like a doll for my new husband’s amusement. Here I am, taking orders on what to wear and how to style my hair, while he’s off tending to things he deemed more important than helping his new wife get settled in.

Yeah, I’ll take a hard pass on conforming to his preferred style.

“Can I help you with anything else?” Clara asks, blowing past my obvious shock and disdain.

I snap my mouth closed, shaking my head.

She nods, stepping away from the bed and striding toward the door, glancing back at me once she reaches it.

“If there’s anything I can do to make your stay here more comfortable, please let me know,” she says. “Preferred soaps, shampoos, anything of that sort. You can make a shopping list and I’ll be sure that Andrew gets it.”

“Thanks,” I mumble, still staring blankly at the sea of red fabric spread across the bed. Belatedly, I turn my head in her direction to ask who the hell Andrew is, but

Clara's already gone, leaving me alone in my massive new bedroom.

I toe my heels off, leaving them strewn on the floor and padding barefoot over to the door to close it. Then I march toward the bed, angrily sweeping the red dresses off the surface and onto the floor. The beautiful gowns land in a crumpled heap, but I can't find it in myself to care. Not now. Not when my future looks so bleak.

Pulling back the thick, pillowy comforter, I slide into bed between the sheets, lying on my side and tucking my knees into my chest.

And for the first time since my father told me he was selling me off, I allow myself to cry.

I don't come out of my room all day. I just lie in bed and wallow in my own self-pity, shedding a tear of mourning for every shattered dream and broken promise throughout my pathetic twenty-two year existence. Then, when I've got nothing left in me, I finally pull myself out of bed, strap on my metaphorical big-girl panties, and forge ahead with readying myself for my first meal as Mrs. Volkov .

The en-suite bathroom connected to my bedroom is incredible. It's wall-to-wall Calcutta marble with dual sinks, a giant soaker tub, and an enormous shower that could easily fit six people, if group showers were your sort of thing. It feels more like a day spa than a personal bathroom, and I spend entirely too long sampling the various soaps and body oils, washing and preening and plucking until I feel like a new woman.

I don't do it for him . I do it for me ; as a symbolic way of washing away the scourge of my old life and starting anew. This marriage doesn't have to be a death sentence. I'm a resilient girl; surely I can make the best of this fucked-up situation I've found myself in. Women in this world have to find a way to harness their own power and carve out a place for themselves, so damnit, that's what I intend to do.

I don't wear red. If I start out by complying with Roman's demands, he'll think he can walk all over me. I decide I need to assert my independence and show him I won't be so easily cowed, so I thumb through the hangers in my closet full of expensive new clothes— all in my size— until I find a tasteful black silk gown with delicately thin straps, a high neck, and a plunging back. The dress fits me like a glove, clinging to the curves of my hip bones and accentuating my flat stomach.

I've starved myself for this body, so it's my right to show it off. My father monitored every morsel of food I put in my mouth so I'd stay rail-thin and pleasing to the eye of potential suitors. God forbid I actually possess womanly curves . He molded me to his own ideal of beauty, and I had no choice in the matter. I was always just chattel to him, an object to be traded to the highest bidder... so I may as well let Roman see exactly what he's bought.

The grotesque burn scar on my arm is on full display, and I sweep my long blonde hair up into a chignon, securing it with a beautiful pearl clip I find in the makeup vanity. I also find plenty of makeup and beauty products in there, everything brand new, just like the clothes. This room is stocked with all a girl could want or need, which tells me that this little arrangement was likely in the works for far longer than my father led me to suspect. It should come as no surprise that I'm the last to know, but the realization still sits bitter on my tongue.

Clara instructed me not to wear too much makeup, so naturally, I cake it on thick, taking time to create a dark smoky eye effect. I top off the look with a nude lip, tossing the tubes of red lipstick into the wastebasket as a last 'fuck you' to my new husband, then make my way downstairs ten minutes late, hoping I'll find him half as agitated as he made me with his tardiness at lunch earlier.

When I reach the bottom of the staircase, however, I realize that I have no idea where the dining room is even located. I spend another ten minutes wandering around the dark, winding halls of the first floor before I finally stumble upon it, finding the formal dining room to be just as large and opulent as everything else in this pompous mansion from hell. Dark, arabesque patterned wallpaper lines the windowless walls, and the long dining table in the middle of the room is surrounded by twelve black velvet-upholstered chairs, flames flickering ominously in the candelabra centerpiece stretching across it.

Roman isn't in the room when I arrive, and for a moment, I wonder if he's already

eaten and left. But then Clara rushes in, giving me a scowl of disapproval and hustling me over to a seat beside the head of the table, furthest from the door. She pulls the chair out for me, directing me to take a seat before scurrying back out of the room.

I sit there alone for the next ten minutes, the smells wafting in from the open doorway making my mouth water and my stomach rumble in protest. Then, right as the large grandfather clock in the hall chimes eight o'clock, my husband finally graces me with his presence.

He strolls into the dining room like he doesn't have a care in the world, his posture tall and his stride confident. It isn't until he pulls out his chair at the head of the table and takes his seat that he even glances my way, his glare of displeasure instantly obliterating my self-confidence.

He purses his lips, jaw ticking in agitation as he takes in my appearance. At first, I think the look of disgust on his face is in response to the hideous scar on my arm, but he only gives it a passing glance, focusing instead on my hair, makeup, and attire with an assessing eye. "Did Clara fail to instruct you on how to dress for dinner?" he asks, his voice a low, eerie monotone.

I square my shoulders, sitting up a little straighter. "I prefer black," I say, all false bravado as I lift a hand to gesture around the room. "From the looks of this place, I figured you do, too."

Clara enters the room carrying two plates of food, but Roman's eyes don't leave mine. He keeps me pinned beneath his intense green-eyed stare, tongue darting out to wet his lips as he speaks to his housekeeper while still looking at me. "Clara, if you're unable to effectively instruct Mrs. Volkov on appropriate dinner attire, then perhaps your services here are no longer needed."

Clara pales, stopping in her tracks and darting her wide-eyed gaze between me and my new husband. “I...”

“She told me,” I cut in, for some reason feeling like I need to defend this woman that I barely even know. “I just decided to do my own thing. I didn’t think it was a big deal.”

Roman stares at me for a moment longer, then heaves an exasperated sigh, picking up his black cloth napkin and unfurling it as he glances over at Clara. “Can you see to it that my wife understands what’s expected of her going forward?”

My fists clench atop the table. I hate how he’s speaking about me like I’m not even in the room; like I’m a child who needs to be reminded of her place. Rage bubbles in my veins, crawling beneath my skin, but out of fear for Roman carrying out his threat to fire the housekeeper, I stay silent. Clara and I may not be on friendly terms yet, but as the sole staff member in the house, she’s my only potential ally here in my new home. I need to keep her close.

“Yes, of course, Mr. Volkov,” Clara replies, casting a wary glance in my direction.

Roman swings his gaze over to me, narrowing his eyes. “Is your cooperation going to be a problem, Mrs. Volkov?”

My fists tighten at the way he accentuates ‘Missus’ to declare his ownership, fingernails digging crescents into my palms.

“No,” I whisper.

“Excellent,” he snaps, whipping his head back around to face his housekeeper. “Then Clara, you can leave the plates here and head on home for the evening,” he says, pressing a finger to the table in command. “It seems my new wife and I could use

some time alone.”

I cringe as Clara rushes to obey, sliding both plates of food onto the table in front of Roman and scurrying out of the room. As soon as she closes the doors behind her, sealing us in the dining room alone, Roman turns his attention back on me, tapping his thigh.

“Come here, pet.”

His condescending tone sets my teeth on edge. “I’m not your pet, I’m your wife ,” I grit out.

He waves a hand dismissively, green eyes sparkling. “Semantics.” He taps his thigh again in command. “ Now , wife. You’ll find I don’t like to be kept waiting.”

I want to scream at him, to tell him that I don’t like to be kept waiting either, but I doubt he considered that when he showed up at lunch twenty minutes late or strolled in here thirty minutes after I was told to arrive. It’s becoming very clear that this is Roman Volkov’s world and now I’m just living in it. I’d be smart to pick and choose my battles if I’m to have any prayer of survival.

Begrudgingly, I push my chair back from the table, easing to my feet.

He leans back in his own chair, swiping a hand over his chin as he takes in the sight of me in the gown he bought, eyes touring my body as I step closer. My cheeks burn in humiliation as I step around his spread knees and lower myself down to sit on his thigh, Roman’s hand landing on the small of my back to steady me. My breath catches in my throat at the sensation of his callused fingers grazing my bare spine, and I mentally curse myself for choosing the backless dress over one of the other options.

With his other hand, he reaches out and drags one of the plates closer to him, picking up his fork to spear a roasted baby carrot. Then he lifts it, bringing it to my mouth.

“I don’t need you to feed me,” I grumble in protest.

Roman angles his head, meeting my eyes. “But it would please me.” He moves the fork closer to my mouth. “Don’t you want to please me?”

I narrow my eyes on him. “Do you want an honest answer?”

He lowers the fork with a sigh, resting it on the edge of the plate. The silver clatters against the china, the carrot still secured in the tines of the fork. “Sure, let’s be honest with one another, shall we?” he muses, the low tenor of his voice making the little hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Fine,” I declare with a newfound surge of confidence, swiveling on his lap to face him and meeting his harsh glare with one of my own. “No, Roman, I don’t want to please you. I don’t want you to feed me like a pet, and I don’t want to be told what to wear or how to act. This marriage wasn’t my choice, but we’re both stuck in it now, so we might as well get this all out in the open so we can figure out how to move forward amicably.”

A wave of relief washes over me as soon as the words tumble out of my mouth, like a weight I didn’t even realize I was carrying has finally been lifted. My whole life, I’ve been too afraid to stand up to my father, constantly allowing myself to be stepped on by the only man in my life. But that’s not how it has to be anymore. I can be braver. Stronger.

My shot of courage is laughably short-lived.

Before I even realize what’s happening, Roman abruptly shoots to his feet, the arm

banded around my waist taking me with him. He swipes the plates aside and bends me over the table in their place, slamming my front against the hard wooden surface. Wrenching one of my arms behind my back, he fists my hair tightly in his opposite hand, using his grip on it to press my cheek against the table and pinning me down with his weight against my back.

“Let’s get one thing straight, wife ,” he growls, his face inches from mine as he hovers over me like a savage beast. “Your sole purpose from here on out is to please me . If I tell you to sit, you’ll sit. If I want to feed you, you’ll swallow every goddamn bite I put in your mouth. And if I want to fuck you, you’ll bend over, spread your pretty thighs, and take my cock like a good wife. Do you understand me, pet , or am I not making myself clear enough?” He punctuates that last assertion by grinding his hips forward roughly, the hard ridge of his cock rutting against my backside.

“Yes!” I whimper, the fingers of my free hand scrabbling for purchase against the tabletop as I pant for breath. His body is crushingly heavy on top of mine, squeezing all the air from my lungs.

“Yes what ?” he snarls as he jerks my head back, tugging the strands of my hair so hard that tears spring to my eyes.

“Yes, sir!” I choke, assuming that’s what he’s seeking.

He abruptly releases me, rising to his full height and taking a step backwards to smooth the front of his suit jacket and straighten his cuffs. “Good girl.”

My body sags against the surface of the table, a tear sliding from the corner of my eye and across the bridge of my nose.

“Get up.”

This time, I don't hesitate to do as I'm told. I press my palms to the wood, pushing up from the table to stand on shaky legs. The pearl clip that was holding my chignon in place hangs pathetically from the back of my head, my coiffed hairstyle ruined by Roman's rough hands.

He doesn't seem fazed by my disheveled appearance. He sinks down into his chair again, tapping his thigh in command.

I sit.

"Now," he says, reaching out for one of the plates and sliding it back over in front of him. He picks up the fork, the carrot he tried to feed me earlier still held securely in its tines. "Eat."

He raises it to my lips, and I open them obediently, taking the food into my mouth. As I chew, Roman reaches up to remove the clip from my hair with his other hand, combing his fingers through the long blonde strands and stroking them down my back. I suppress a shiver of disgust as I swallow past the lump in my throat, only for him to bring the fork to my mouth again, feeding me a piece of potato.

Even though I'm starving, I can't bring myself to enjoy it. Bite after bite, with humiliation burning through me, I eat his food and endure his gentle stroking of my hair like the pampered pet he wants me to be. All the while, the rage burning inside me only grows, every morsel tasting like ash in my mouth.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:57 pm

4

By some miracle, Roman doesn't make any attempt to consummate our marriage the first night. After dinner, the two of us part ways at the split in the staircase, him continuing on to the east wing while I retreat to the west. My sleep is fitful, and as soon as I wake the next morning, I begin plotting my escape.

I may not have anywhere to go or a dime to my name, but I'm willing to endure a life on the streets begging for scraps if it means never being subjected to another one of my husband's dehumanizing power trips. A little piece of me died at the dinner table last night, somewhere between him force-feeding me bites of steak and stroking my hair down my back while calling me his good girl.

I don't want to be his good girl.

I don't want to be his wife.

I don't want to be his anything.

My only way out is to run, and if I want to make a clean escape, I'll have to form a solid plan. It won't do me any good to be impulsive about this and risk getting caught. If Roman knows I'm trying to get away from him, I have no doubt he'll put measures in place to prevent it from happening.

No, if this is going to work, I'll only have one chance at it, so I'll need to play it smart.

A gentle knock on the bedroom door interrupts my tangled mess of thoughts, the sound of a key turning in the lock prompting me to sit up in bed as I cast a wary glance toward it. The door creaks open on its antique hinges as Clara lets herself in, balancing a tray in her hands.

“Good morning, Mrs. Volkov,” she greets in a clipped tone, stepping into the room and carrying the tray over to a small table near the windows. She places it on top, then moves aside to sweep the curtains open, flooding the room with light.

I slap a hand over my eyes to shield them from the sun, groaning in protest, but she just continues onto the next window, not stopping until all the curtains are thrown wide.

“I’ve brought your breakfast,” she says as she walks back over to the table and uncovers the tray.

I toss the covers off my body, twisting to set my feet on the floor. “I’m not hungry.”

“Mr. Volkov instructed me to make sure you eat.”

“Did he also tell you to hold me down and feed me if I refuse?” I mumble bitterly.

Clara lifts her head to glance in my direction, a strange expression crossing her face that I can’t quite read. Then she drops her gaze back to the tray without a word, picking up a carafe of coffee and pouring the steaming dark liquid into a mug.

I shove up from the bed with a sigh, stretching my arms over my head. The silk pajama set I’m wearing was waiting for me on my bed when I returned from dinner last night, the comforter peeled back invitingly and the pillows fluffed. I have no doubt it was Clara’s doing while I endured my dinner with the devil.

“Mr. Volkov is a good man,” she mumbles, sliding a plate from the tray onto the table and placing a set of silverware neatly beside it. “He’s just trying to take care of you.”

“He’s a monster,” I scoff. “You have to know that. Whatever he’s paying you, surely it can’t be worth...”

“Excuse my boldness, ma’am , but you have no idea what Mr. Volkov has done for me,” Clara interjects, snapping her head in my direction and narrowing her dark eyes. “He’s offered you a good life here. The least you could do is show a little bit of gratitude.”

“ Gratitude? ” I ask incredulously, mouth falling agape. “You think I should be grateful for being sold off into a marriage I never wanted with a complete stranger?”

Clara just shakes her head, dropping her gaze to unload the rest of the tray. I watch her for a moment, folding my arms over my chest and rubbing my hands against my bare biceps for warmth. I was plenty warm last night in bed beneath the blankets, but the thin silk shorts and camisole I’m wearing do little to fend off the morning chill now that I’ve climbed out from underneath them.

“I can’t imagine why you’d actually want to work here,” I grumble, venturing closer to the table.

“My own husband is quite ill,” Clara murmurs absently as she arranges small baskets of fruit and pastries. “There came a time last year when we didn’t think he would make it, but then Mr. Volkov stepped in to offer the best care money can buy. He’ll continue to do so, providing I remain in his employ.” She steps back from the table, smoothing her apron as she looks over at me. “I understand my duty to my husband well, and working here means a great deal to me because it’s my way of taking care of him. I don’t believe you’ve judged your own husband fairly at all. Say what you

will about the man, but Mr. Volkov takes care of what's his."

"And now I'm his," I mutter under my breath, picking up on her insinuation.

"You should count yourself lucky for it. Excuse me." Clara turns on a heel, heading for my closet and disappearing inside.

So I guess I shouldn't start making the two of us matching friendship bracelets anytime soon. Apparently Clara only sees me as an ungrateful brat, not an unwilling captive.

I approach the small table where she's laid out my breakfast, glancing down at the food resentfully. In addition to the fruit and pastries, there's a plate with scrambled eggs and bacon, the sight of it so enticing that my stomach immediately growls.

I never ate breakfast back at home. My father made enough comments about my food intake during our other meals throughout the day that it just seemed easier to skip one altogether. Coffee is something that I always indulged in, though, so I reach for the steaming mug, eager to get my morning dose of caffeine.

Clara emerges from the closet with a stack of folded clothing in her hands, her black Mary Janes clipping against the hardwood floor as she strides past me to place it at the foot of the bed.

"Should I run you a bath?" she asks, moving around to the rumpled side of the bed I just climbed out of.

"No thanks," I mumble as I sink down into the chair at the table with the coffee cup still clasped in my hands. I take a hesitant sip from it, pleasantly surprised to find the coffee has cooled to the perfect temperature. As Clara fusses with making the bed, I pick at a piece of the bacon on the plate, unable to resist a taste.

Once she's finished, Clara rounds the bed and moves toward the door, lingering there like a shadow rather than exiting through it. I can still feel the weight of her judgment hanging over me like a dark cloud.

"Are you really going to watch me eat?" I ask, casting her a wary glance.

"Mr. Volkov said..."

"I don't care what he said!" I blurt, slamming my coffee cup down on the table so hard that it rattles the silverware. I bury my face in my hands, memories of last night's horror show in the dining room pummeling my brain. "Just go, please," I groan, my voice muffled behind my palms. "I want to be alone."

"But I need the laundry, ma'am."

I pick my head up, narrowing my eyes on her in question. "What?"

She gestures to me. "Your pajamas."

I push up from my chair with an exasperated huff, grasping onto the lace-trimmed hem of my sleep tank and rucking it up over my head. Then I yank my shorts down my hips, stooping down to gather them from the floor before crumpling both silk garments in my hands. I march over to Clara in all my naked glory, shoving them at her chest with an irritated, "Here."

She averts her eyes as she reaches out to take them from me, keeping her expression neutral. "I'll be back for your tray shortly."

"Great," I mutter, turning away and stomping toward the stack of clothes she left at the foot of my neatly-made bed. I hear the click of her shoes against the floor as she retreats, the door creaking closed behind her.

Still fuming, I pull on the clothes she laid out for me— a bra and underwear, black leggings, a white cotton camisole, and an oversized gray cardigan— all brand new. I sweep my hair up in a messy bun, then grab an apple out of the fruit basket on the table before walking over to the glass French doors that lead out to the balcony.

The crisp morning breeze billows into the room as I pull them open, stepping outside onto the wide stone terrace. In any other context, a setting like this would seem almost romantic. The balcony outside my room gives off Romeo and Juliet vibes, though I somehow doubt I'll ever find a lovestruck boy standing beneath it, spouting poetry. I suppose it's fitting to have that particular story come to mind, considering they both die in the end. That's what love is in my world: a death sentence .

I'm not sure if I loved Wesley. I liked him, though, enough to sneak him into my room late at night and climb beneath the sheets with him. It was awkward and clumsy and nowhere near as satisfying as I imagined sex would be, but at least it was my choice.

Evidently, it was the last one I'd make for myself.

Stepping up to the wide stone railing, I lean my elbows against it, raising the apple to my mouth and sinking my teeth into the fruit as I look out over the sprawling property below. My eyes drink in my surroundings as I chew, flitting from the pristinely clipped lawn, to the meticulously maintained hedges, to the tangle of forest beyond. I mentally catalog every detail, mapping out possible escape routes in my mind until a blur of movement catches my eye.

I perk up at the sight of the large black dog trotting along the border of the lawn, as if he's hard at work doing a perimeter check. I smile as I watch him for a few seconds, still munching on the apple as the seed of an idea begins to take shape in my mind.

Pushing off from the railing, I spin around and head back inside, grabbing a blueberry

muffin from the basket of pastries on the table and tucking it into the pocket of my sweater.

If I'm going to escape, I'll need a sound plan. And the first step is familiarizing myself with the security around here.

I tug the sleeves of my sweater down over my hands, a chill settling in my bones as I glance up at the crumbling stone facade of the castle-like structure of my new home. I have to admit, the ghoulish appearance of this house suits my new husband's demeanor like a glove. As scary and imposing as I thought this mansion was when we first pulled up to it yesterday, it's not nearly as terrifying as the man himself.

Part of me is surprised that I wasn't tackled on my way out the front door and forced back inside. Then again, the only place I've been expressly forbidden from entering is Roman's wing of the house. Nobody has said anything about going outside, so I may as well take my chances and try to get a handle on the layout of the property while I can. High risk, high reward, right?

Much like the interior of the home, it's eerily quiet out here, too. There's no sign of the aged groundskeeper I saw yesterday pruning the hedges, and the dog I spotted from the balcony earlier doesn't appear to have stuck around, either. Even the birds seem to have fled the trees, off singing their songs somewhere else. Probably someplace where the air isn't so damn suffocating.

Treading a path across the lawn, I make my way around the west side of the manor, aiming to identify the balcony connected to my bedroom. I find it easily enough since it appears to be the only one on the second floor of the west wing, but before I can go about scouting potential footholds in the stone to get from the balcony down to the ground level, a blur of motion across the lawn catches my attention.

The dog!

“Here, boy!” I call eagerly, crouching down and making kissy noises in an effort to entice the animal closer.

He freezes, turning his head in my direction and staring me down.

Okay, maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. The dog suddenly looks a whole lot bigger than he did from the vantage point of my balcony– and a whole lot meaner, too. His body is thick and muscular, the tan markings around his face standing out in contrast to the rest of his black fur. I think he’s a Rottweiler or some other similarly intimidating breed.

Before I have a chance to rethink my approach, the dog comes running toward me at a dead sprint, eating up the distance between us in a matter of seconds. He skids to a stop mere inches away, his lips pulling back from his teeth in a snarl as he eyes me warily.

“Hi, boy,” I say sweetly, boldly extending a hand for him to sniff. “Look how pretty you are! Such a handsome fella...”

The dog moves closer, nose twitching as he sniffs the tips of my fingers.

“I’m not scary, see?” I sing-song, slowly retracting my hand. Then I reach down into the pocket of my sweater, brandishing the muffin from breakfast and holding it out to him. “How about a special treat for a special boy?”

He wags his cropped tail, booty shaking as he scarfs down the entire thing in a single bite.

“Wow, you liked that, huh?” I laugh, reaching up to stroke the top of his head and scratch behind his ear. He tips his head to give me better access, and I bring up my other hand to scratch his neck beneath his thick leather collar, his tongue lolling out

the side of his mouth.

“There’s more where that came from,” I tell the dog as I continue loving up on him. He may look mean, but he’s surprisingly docile, licking my hands and leaning into my touch. Maybe he’s as starved for positive human interaction as I am. “Aren’t you just the sweetest boy?” I praise, grinning broadly as I lavish him with attention.

“How’d you get him to come to you?”

I jolt to my feet with a start at the sound of Roman’s deep voice, whipping around to see him standing on the lawn a few feet away. He’s dressed in a crisp charcoal gray suit, inky black hair perfectly coiffed and green eyes intently trained on me. While the glimmer of malice I saw in them last night isn’t present, I’ve still got my guard up, subconsciously slinking back a step.

Roman snaps his fingers at his side and the dog trots over to him, sitting at his heel and looking up at his master obediently. He pats its head, and my gut twists at the reminder of how this man handled me like a pet night at dinner last night, bile crawling up my throat.

When I lift my gaze, I find that Roman’s still looking to me expectantly, awaiting my answer.

“I didn’t do anything, just gave him some love,” I mumble, subtly retreating another step. While he hasn’t made any move to come closer, I can’t help but be wary of his proximity.

“Hm,” Roman muses, giving the dog’s head another pat. “He doesn’t typically take to strangers.”

I fold my arms tightly across my chest. “Funny, we have that in common,” I murmur.

I swear I see the corner of his mouth twitch up in the ghost of a smirk, but just as quickly as it appears, it's gone, replaced with his usual blank expression.

"What's his name?" I ask, crouching down again and patting my knee.

The dog trots over to me happily, eager for more pets.

"Nox," Roman replies as he watches our interaction intently.

"Aww, what a handsome name," I coo, looking into Nox's brown eyes as I massage his scruff with my fingertips. "You're such a good boy, aren't you Noxy?" I giggle as he licks my face to show his appreciation.

Roman snaps his fingers at his side again, the dog immediately leaving me to return to him obediently. I push up to my feet with a sigh, irritated at his flex of control over Nox. If he's trying to prove a point, then he's succeeded.

My husband stares at me and I stare right back in defiance, refusing to cower to him—that is, until the dog at Roman's heel suddenly makes a loud retching sound.

He jumps back, but not before Nox vomits a goopy pile of blueberry muffin all over his shoe.

I look on in a mix of shock and horror as Roman curses, lifting his foot to flick the puke off his shoe. Nox slinks back, still looking a little green, and my husband jerks his head up, an accusatory glare aimed squarely at me.

"Did you feed my dog?"

"N-no," I stammer dumbly.

His jaw tenses, hands balling into fists at his sides and alarm bells sounding in my head. My muscles tense, body coiling up like a spring in preparation to take off running, but he doesn't move toward me. He just takes a deep breath, then blows it out slowly with a shake of his head.

"Did you feed my dog?" he repeats, his voice a low, eerie monotone.

I just stand there like a mute, clasping my trembling hands in front of me.

Roman heaves a sigh, scrubbing a hand over his face and looking down at the poor dog. He snaps his fingers twice and Nox runs off, then he lifts his gaze to me once more.

I swallow hard, bracing myself for impact.

"My dogs have champion bloodlines," he states calmly. "In order to stay in top physical form, they ascribe to a strict diet. Do not feed them table scraps. Understood?"

I was expecting him to snap off or get physical with me like last night, but his cool, aloof demeanor throws me for a loop, his unpredictability making my anxiety pique. I nod my head numbly, wringing my hands. "I understand."

"Good," he quips, picking a piece of lint off his sleeve. "Now, for the real reason I came out here to find you. I'm having dinner with an associate tonight. You'll be joining me."

"What?" I blurt, eyes going wide. "No."

He arches a dark brow. "Excuse me?"

Any sense of self-preservation I have flies out the window at the prospect of enduring another dinner as Roman's pet. "I won't sit on your lap and let you feed me in front of your friends," I rush out, shaking my head adamantly. "Last night was bad enough, but I won't be humiliated in front of other people for your amusement, I refuse..."

"That won't be happening," he deadpans, cutting me off. "As long as you don't embarrass me, I won't even touch you. All you have to do tonight is sit there and look pretty. Think you can manage that?"

I eye him warily, struggling to detect the lie buried beneath his words. "I don't trust you."

"You don't have to," he snaps, looking annoyed. "We'll leave at eight. I've asked Clara to ensure you dress appropriately."

Without another word, Roman abruptly turns away, striding across the lawn as his declaration settles over me.

Did he just say...?

"Leave?" I call after him curiously. "Where are we going?"

He doesn't answer. And while I watch him walk away, the knot of anxiety in my belly only tightens further as I'm left to wonder what fresh hell awaits me tonight.

6

“E liza, that’s such a pretty name,” the brunette across the table from me says in an accent that I can’t quite place, taking another swig of wine from her glass. She swallows it down, beaming a dazzling smile as her gaze slides between me and Roman. “Where did you two meet, again?”

“Family friends,” he replies, not missing a beat.

The ‘associate’ of Roman’s that we’re dining with this evening is a man named Anton, and the excessively perky brunette currently seated across from me is his wife, Cherie. The two of them are clearly still in the honeymoon phase, because they haven’t been able to keep their hands off each other since we arrived at the restaurant to meet them, making this whole interaction even more awkward.

“Aww,” Cherie coos, gazing at me thoughtfully. “Well, you’re much prettier than the last one.”

The last one?

I turn to look at Roman in question, but he completely ignores me, just as he has since we embarked on this double date from hell.

At least I didn’t have to wear red. Clara put me in a tasteful black cocktail dress, my hair neatly pinned back and my makeup understated, yet flawless. I begrudgingly allowed the housemaid to dress me up like Roman’s doll, intent on gaining his approval if only to avoid a repeat of last night’s torture. I mean, what’s the point in

pushing back if I'm going to pull a runaway bride? As far as I'm concerned, I'll keep my head down and play my part— within reason— while biding my time until I can make a clean escape. All I have to do until then is survive my husband's mood swings.

The Roman I'm out with tonight isn't the taunting, unhinged man from last night. He's cold and aloof, just as he was when we stood before the priest yesterday and when he caught me feeding his dog earlier. He's completely indifferent toward me, and I'm glad for it— though I haven't let my guard down just in case the other version of him rears his ugly head.

“Anton, tell me you have good news regarding the shipments from Carvallo,” Roman says, running his finger back and forth along the rim of his whiskey glass.

“Apparently there was a small hiccup with customs,” Anton responds with a wince. “My men assure me that it will all be sorted out within twenty-four hours.”

“And what am I supposed to tell Alexei in the meantime?”

I stare down at the enormous rock glittering on my ring finger as the men continue talking shop, mesmerized by the way it catches the light. Roman handed me the ring box as soon as we got in the car, along with a demand that I wear it from now on as a way to substantiate this sham of a marriage. The diamond itself is exquisitely beautiful, its gaudy size undoubtedly a power move on Roman's part to flex his wealth in front of his colleague. I didn't argue about putting it on, though— it's clearly worth a fortune, so my new husband's ego will fund my new life once I manage to escape him.

That's how I'm looking at everything now; as a potential building block in my plan. This dinner, for example— if taking me out and parading me around his friends is going to be a regular thing, I can use it to my advantage. It'd probably be a whole lot

easier to slip away from a crowded restaurant as opposed to his remote estate.

Of course, that'll depend on whether he usually dines as we are now; in a private room with minimal interruption from wait staff. We even entered through the back door of the restaurant, which indicates one of two things: either my new husband is a very private person, or he's paranoid.

Private, I can work with. Paranoid is a wildcard.

"And what of Lipovsky?" Anton asks, slinging an arm over his wife's shoulders and drawing her in closer to his side.

I can't help but watch the way Roman keeps twisting the platinum wedding band around his ring finger, wondering if it feels like a shackle to him, too. "What about him?" he grumbles, the low, threatening tone of his voice sending a shiver up my spine.

Anton shrinks back slightly, telling me which of these men must be running the show when it comes to whatever business they're embroiled in together. He shifts his weight on his chair, pulling his wife in even closer and looking decidedly uncomfortable. "What if he refuses?"

"He'll come to heel," Roman murmurs, still twisting the band around his finger absently. "I have something he wants."

The door on the far side of the room swings open, a young blonde waitress stepping inside. She struts over to our table on her too-tall heels until she's planted herself right beside Roman, smiling down at him in delighted recognition.

"Good evening, Mr. Volkov. Teresa's shift just ended, so I'll be taking care of you for the rest of the night," she purrs, resting a hand on his forearm. "Can I bring you

anything from the bar?”

I don't miss the way she leans in, putting her tits at eye level with his face, nor the way her eyes dart over to clock the ring on his left hand, though she doesn't spare me a glance.

“Two Macallans,” he replies smoothly. “Thanks, Paige.”

She beams a smile at him, spinning on her heels and walking away, swishing her hips a little too much for my taste.

“I wanted some more wine,” Cherie pouts, looking after the waitress wistfully. Then she turns her pout on me, saying, “Eliza, don't you want more wine?”

“She's had enough,” Roman answers for me, and though I've been on my best behavior all evening, for some reason that declaration is the final straw that makes me push back.

“Actually, I think I would like some more,” I say, smiling sweetly as I turn to Roman, the diamond on my finger glittering in the light as I place my hand gently atop his.

He slides his hand out from underneath mine like my touch burns him, the muscle in his jaw feathering as he glares back at me.

I know I'm playing with fire, but now that I've resolved I'm going to escape him, I'm not quite as afraid of getting burned. What's another scar to me, anyways?

The door to the room swings open again, the waitress returning with two glasses of whiskey in her hands. “Here you go,” she says as she approaches the table and sets one in front of each of the men, her eyes lingering on my husband. She flashes him a coy smile as she turns away, heading back the way she came from.

“Paige.”

She stops in her tracks at the sound of her name falling from Roman’s lips, whipping back around like an excitable puppy.

“Yes, Mr. Volkov?” she asks, her heels clipping the stone floor as she rushes back over.

His eyes dart my way for the briefest moment. “The ladies would like more wine. A bottle of your best merlot, please.”

“We just got some new bottles delivered from Italy,” the waitress replies, leaning in eagerly and batting her lashes. Then she boldly sets her hand on top of his, right over the damned wedding band he’s sporting.

He doesn’t pull his hand away from beneath hers , though.

“I’d be happy to take you down to the cellar if you’d like to select it yourself,” she adds.

Is she serious right now?

It takes a great deal of effort for me not to gape at the audacity of this woman. Granted, our marriage is nothing but a hoax, but she’s blatantly propositioning a married man in front of his wife, for fucks sake.

To my surprise, Roman suddenly pushes his chair back, rising to his feet and buttoning his suit coat. “Sure, why not?”

The waitress grins like she’s won the damn lottery, shuffling closer to him and gesturing for the door. “Right this way, sir,” she chirps, leading him out of the private

dining room.

Wait, is he really about to leave me alone with his friends to go fuck this waitress?

The click of the door closing behind them gives me my answer, and my stomach bottoms out as I turn my uncomfortable gaze back on Anton and Cherie, the latter giving me a look so pitying that it makes me want to run out of the room screaming.

“I do love Italian wine,” I sigh, reaching out for my glass and downing the last sip.

“Anton took me to Italy last year,” Cherie gushes, fingers toying with the stem of her own glass. “We had some of the best wine there, and we shipped some back, too. We’ve still got a few bottles left, the two of you must come to our place for dinner sometime so you can try it!”

“Oh, absolutely,” I smile, feigning the same enthusiasm.

Cherie begins to regale me with a story about their trip to Italy while I do my best to maintain my composure as the minutes crawl by.

It’s not the fact that Roman’s off fucking someone else. I couldn’t care less where he sticks his dick, so long as it’s not in me. But the fact that I’m forced to sit here making awkward conversation with a pair of strangers while we all know what he’s off doing is beyond humiliating.

And here I thought the display at dinner last night was the most debasing thing he could do to me.

A good ten minutes pass before Roman and the waitress reappear, along with a fancy bottle of wine boasting a label I can’t even pronounce.

I don't even look at him as he retakes his seat beside me, nor when my glass is replenished after the bottle is uncorked.

For the rest of the evening, I sit there beside him sipping my wine, playing the role he told me to ascribe to from our first meeting.

I'm seen, and not heard.

7

I've always been a heavy sleeper. Our housekeeper used to tease me about it, saying she could run the vacuum around my bed and it wouldn't even rouse me.

Since I moved into Roman's haunted mansion, however, I don't sleep as deeply. Maybe it's the fact that the house is so quiet to begin with, but every creak has me cracking my eyes open, casting a way glance toward my door through the pitch black.

My first night here, every noise was a false alarm, and thus my restlessness was in vain.

Tonight, that's not the case.

I wake with a start to the sound of the lock on my bedroom door turning over, the hinges creaking as it's slowly pushed open. Jolting up in bed, I clutch the covers tightly to my chest, staring into the inky darkness.

For a second, I'm not sure if I really heard the door open or if my mind's just playing tricks on me in my exhausted delirium. Then I hear the soft thud of footsteps moving across the room toward me, the little hairs on the back of my neck standing on end as I see Roman emerge from the shadows in front of my bed like a specter.

"What are you doing in here?" I hiss, both frightened by his sudden intrusion and angry that he just barged into my room uninvited.

He doesn't respond. I eye him nervously as he approaches the opposite side of my

bed, dressed in a simple dark t-shirt and a pair of pajama pants. It's a little jarring to see him without the suit, his usually coiffed hair in a state of rugged dishevelment. I'm so caught off guard by this entire situation that I just watch in a suspended state of shock as he reaches down to pull back the covers, sliding into bed next to me.

My whole body tenses as he shuffles closer beneath the blankets, his arm darting out to clamp firmly around my waist and yank me back down to lie beside him.

"W-what are you doing?" I sputter, my back going rigid as he pulls it tight against the solid wall of muscle that makes up his broad chest.

"Sleeping with my wife," he murmurs, his hand tucking up underneath my silk camisole, palm splaying wide against my belly.

My heart races, mouth going dry. His warm breath skates over the back of my neck, his hard body firmly anchored against mine. With the way he's pinning me, his hand pressed to my stomach and his leg locked over mine, I can barely move an inch.

"I don't want you in here!" I whisper-shout, trying in vain to wriggle free from his iron grip.

"Well that's too damn bad," he chuckles, grinding his hips forward.

My breath catches as I feel the hard ridge of his cock riding against my ass, his hand on my belly sliding up higher beneath my camisole, fingers toying with my nipple.

"Stop!" I grit out through clenched teeth, grabbing onto his forearm and digging my fingernails into his flesh.

It doesn't deter him in the least. Instead, it seems to encourage him. His chest rumbles against my back with something that sounds like a growl, low and demonic. Rather

than fear, heat licks up my spine.

It has to be a biological response, nothing more. I don't want Roman in my bed, I don't want to feel his hands on me. I know for a fact that this isn't something I want, yet my back arches to chase his touch, my teeth sinking into the cushion of my lower lip to stifle a whimper as he pinches my nipple hard.

"I can feel how fast your pulse is racing, hear how your breath keeps hitching," he murmurs, his lips brushing the shell of my ear as his hand leaves my breast and glides up to wrap around my throat. "And you might not even realize it, but you're pushing your ass back against my cock right now. You may say you want me to stop, but your body is telling me something else entirely, pet."

I'm stunned to silence, throat bobbing beneath his palm with a hard swallow.

I should kick, fight, scream, bite... but instead, I whisper, "Did you fuck that waitress?"

Roman goes quiet for a long moment, the silence stretching between us endlessly as his fingers flex their grip around my throat. He's not applying pressure to restrict my breathing, but his hand remains locked in place, almost as a warning of how easily he could.

"Yes," he finally utters, and a wave of white-hot rage spears through me.

"Get off!" I grunt, clawing at his hand on my neck and fighting in earnest to get free.

It's almost laughable how effortlessly he keeps me restrained. "No."

With one hand still firmly locked around my throat, he wrestles the other down the front of my shorts, shoving it between my legs to force them apart.

“Didn’t we come to an understanding last night?” he growls, his rough hand clamping down over my bare mound. “You’re here to please me, wife.”

I squeeze my thighs together, as if that’ll somehow stop him from going further. “Roman...”

“ Sir, ” he corrects, then shoves his hand down farther, plunging a thick digit inside me.

My inner walls clench at the intrusion, my mouth gaping open to gasp for air.

“I knew it,” he declares smugly, pumping his finger in and out a few times while humiliation scalds my veins. Then he abruptly retracts his hand, pulling it out of my shorts and bringing it up to my mouth, wiping his glistening finger against my lips. “You’re soaked.”

I recoil with disgust and he lifts his hand away from my mouth, bringing it up behind my ear where I hear the telltale slurp of him sucking my arousal off his finger.

I cringe, another shiver racing up my spine as I struggle to discern the sensations raging through my body and mind.

Anger.

Outrage.

Shame.

Disgust.

Fear.

Desire?

He reaches down between my legs again, shoving his hand beneath my shorts to stroke his fingers through my slick folds. "I'll bet you don't even know why this makes you so wet," he murmurs, teeth nipping my earlobe as his other hand finally leaves my throat, sliding down to grope my breast again. "Fear and arousal are two sides of the same coin, pet." He pinches my nipple harder than the last time, causing me to suck in a gasp through my gritted teeth. "Much like pain and pleasure."

What the hell is happening to me right now?

I hate this man with every fiber of my being, yet my body seems to be reacting to him on its own accord. A flood of heat rushes south, my breath coming out in short, staccato pants as he rubs the pad of a finger against my clit.

Wesley wasn't very adept at the intricacies of female anatomy. Sure, we touched and explored and experimented, but his clumsy hands were never able to provoke this type of reaction from my body. Roman plays my clit like the strings of a harp, creating a symphony of sensation that my mind can't even process beyond craving more .

"It's maddening, isn't it?" he hums, applying the perfect amount of pressure behind his ministrations until my legs tremble. "To hate something, yet want it so much?"

"Fuck you," I breathe, my hips grinding senselessly in time with his movements. The coil in my belly is winding tighter and tighter, my muscles clenching as I climb the precipice of release.

And then, just as I'm about to tip over the edge and go freefalling into my climax, he stops .

Roman flattens his hand, patting it against my pussy. “You’ll get rewarded when you learn to behave, pet,” he murmurs, pulling his hand out of my shorts.

My mouth falls open in shocked indignation, my lips opening and closing like a fish out of water.

I want to scream, curse, burn this damned house to the ground...

Instead, I just lay there, furiously fighting to catch my breath as Roman releases his hold on me and slides out of bed. I punch my fists against the mattress to sit up, turning my outraged expression on him, but he just pivots away and pads toward the door, his silhouette disappearing into the cover of darkness beyond my bed.

I hear my bedroom door creak open and close behind him, followed by the metallic scrape of the key turning in the lock. Then he’s gone in the night, leaving me in a puddle of my own shameful desperation.

“Clara, can I ask you something?”

“Of course, Mrs. Volkov,” she replies, pouring coffee from the carafe into the cup on the table in front of me. Whisps of steam curl from the rim of the mug as she pours, the familiar scent drawing me in like a siren’s song.

I’m not sure I’ve ever been so excited to drink a cup of coffee in my life. I wasn’t able to sleep a wink after Roman’s late-night intrusion, and I’m definitely feeling it today.

Clara slides the cup closer to me once she’s finished pouring it and I eagerly wrap my hands around the porcelain, lifting it to my mouth to take a sip. I brace myself for the liquid to scald my tongue, but once again, it’s the perfect temperature.

After a few greedy sips of the much-needed caffeine, I lower my mug, glancing up at Clara. “Was there another before me?” I ask cautiously. “Another Mrs. Volkov?”

She purses her lips, pausing for a moment as her dark-eyed gaze bores into mine. “Yes.”

I flinch back in surprise, her admission immediately sending my mind reeling. “What happened to her?”

“I can’t say,” Clara mutters, placing my breakfast plate in front of me.

“How long were they married?”

She blows out an annoyed breath, wiping her hands on her apron and looking down at me with poorly-masked disapproval. “If you have questions, you should probably ask your husband.”

I slump back in my chair, knee bouncing anxiously as Clara proceeds to set out my silverware and the baskets of fruit and pastries. She’s obviously not going to be of any help when it comes to finding out more about Roman’s secrets.

“Not every woman can handle this life, and more than that, not every woman can handle a man like Mr. Volkov,” Clara murmurs, arranging everything on the table to her liking. “His... moods.”

“You mean his split personality?” I snort.

In the short time I’ve known my husband, two distinct sides of him have begun to emerge— the cold, aloof control freak, and the manic, unhinged puppet master. I’m not sure which side scares me more.

Clara presses her lips into a thin line as she steps back, her expression impassable. “I hope you’ll suit him better than the last. He deserves some good in his life.”

“Why didn’t you marry him off to your own daughter then?” I grumble.

“If I had one, and that was an option, it would’ve been an honor.”

Wow, this lady has really been drinking the Kool-Aid.

Clara turns away, heading over to my closet to select my clothes for the day while I remain at the table, sipping my coffee and picking at my breakfast.

“I’ll come back for the laundry today,” she says when she emerges from the closet, giving me a pointed look as she walks past me to set the clothes at the foot of the bed. Guess she doesn’t want another strip show.

“Thanks,” I mumble, still lost in thought.

Since Clara is clearly a dead end in the friends department, I’ll have to figure out a new angle. It occurred to me last night— somewhere between my third glass of wine and Roman paying the bill— that until I’m able to get away from him for good, I should be using my time here to try to uncover some sort of leverage to wield so he won’t come looking for me after I escape. All men in the business of organized crime have secrets they’d rather keep hidden, and I’m sure my husband is no exception.

I just need to uncover one of them.

After getting dressed in the clothes Clara laid out, I decide to venture outside of the house again, grabbing a croissant from the pastry basket and tucking it into my pocket along the way. In hindsight, the blueberry muffin was a bad idea. Probably too much sugar. But I’ll bet my new pal Nox will enjoy the croissant.

The morning chill is still hanging in the air when I step outside, a sharp breeze rustling the leaves of the trees on the border of the lawn. I head around the west side of the mansion again, pausing to stare up at my balcony. Though the stone facade of the house is rough, there doesn’t appear to be enough footholds in the rock to use for climbing down. I’ll just have to find some other way.

Continuing on around the side of the manor, my gaze lifts to a tall tower built into the corner of the structure, rising a story above the rest. I raise a hand to shade my eyes, squinting against the sunlight as I peer up at it. The entrance to the tower has to be somewhere at the end of the west wing. If I could get up there, it’d give me a better vantage point to scout the property for escape routes. I could get a better idea of what

I'm dealing with here.

I lower my hand, chewing on the inside of my cheek as I turn over the possibilities in my mind. If I'm going to run, every step of my escape will have to be precisely planned. I'll need contingency plans, too, just in case something goes awry. If I'm caught, I won't get another chance. It has to go perfectly.

I'm still standing there mulling everything over when I spot the dog, who comes trotting up to me with his big pink tongue hanging out.

"Hey, buddy," I greet warmly, stooping down to scratch his ear when he approaches.

He leans into my touch, his stumpy little tail wagging as I crouch down to love up on him. Then a second dog suddenly appears, coming over to check in on his brother. I make just as big of a fuss over him, giving him pets and splitting the croissant between the two of them.

"Good boys," I coo, scratching their scruff after they lick the crumbs from my palms. "You're just the prettiest pups, aren't you?"

"Now there's something you don't see every day," a gruff voice comments, and I glance up to see the gray-haired man I spotted from my window on my first day here.

I push up to my feet, smiling at him kindly. "What's that?"

He gestures to the dogs with a raspy chuckle. "Those beasts being friendly."

"Aw, they just need some love," I say, stooping over to give each of them another scratch. "I met Noxy yesterday, but do you know this one's name?"

"Vesper."

“Aw, what a handsome name!”

The dog slurps his tongue out to lick my hand, as if he appreciates the compliment. I love up on both of them a little more, then rise to stand again, finding the old man still watching me thoughtfully.

“So, you must be the new Mrs. Volkov,” he remarks as the dogs sniff the ground around my feet before becoming disinterested and trotting off.

“Guess so. And you are?”

“Lev,” he replies, sticking out a weathered hand. “The groundskeeper.”

I step forward, placing my palm in his. “Nice to meet you, Lev. I can’t tell you how nice it is to hold a decent conversation with someone around here.”

He cups his other hand over mine, eyes twinkling with amusement as he leans in. “Old Clara giving you a hard time?”

The corner of my mouth ticks up. “How’d you guess?”

He smirks, releasing my hand with another throaty chuckle. “Eh, she’s just protective over the family. She’s been with them since she was your age.”

“Wow, really?”

He nods, the skin around his eyes crinkling with his smile. “Yes, ma’am. She used to work for Magnus. When he built his new place and moved out a decade ago, she stayed here rather than going with him. She’s always had a soft spot for Roman.”

“Well, that explains a lot,” I snort. “And what about you?”

“Oh, I’ve been here just as long,” he says with a wistful sigh. “We’re a loyal bunch, I suppose.”

I roll my lower lip between my teeth, my curiosity running away with me. “Did you know the last Mrs. Volkov, then?” I venture.

“I did,” he replies slowly.

“What happened to her?”

“Eh, that’s not something we talk about around here,” he mutters, giving me the brush-off. “Wouldn’t want to upset Mr. Volkov.”

I furrow my brow, narrowing my eyes on the aged groundskeeper. “Why would it upset him? Did something bad happen?”

Lev’s gaze lifts over my shoulder. “I have a feeling something bad’s about to,” he says with a wince.

I turn to follow his line of sight, finding Clara storming across the lawn toward me, her expression pinched in a scowl.

“Mr. Volkov wants to see you right away,” she says in a clipped tone, beckoning me with the impatient wave of a hand.

My stomach drops, pulse taking off at a gallop.

“Did he say what he wanted?” I ask warily, following her around to the front of the house.

She doesn’t respond, but as soon as I see him, I know— because he’s stooped over

with a handkerchief in hand, cleaning off his shoe.

A wave of déjà vu hits and I stop in my tracks, staring in horror as he straightens to his full height and his green eyes lock with mine.

Clara scurries into the house while I stand there frozen, rooted to the spot as Roman storms in my direction.

“You fed my dog again.” The low, dangerous octave of his voice makes my heart race faster as I feel the color drain from my face.

“N-no, I didn’t,” I stammer, retreating a step as he closes in. “He must still be sick from yesterday.”

Roman grinds to a halt in front of me, jaw tightly clenched and fists balled at his sides. “Don’t lie to me.”

“Don’t barge in my room in the middle of the night,” I fire back.

Something flickers in his emerald eyes, the muscle in his jaw ticking. “Lock your door.”

“Funny, locked doors only work if the other person doesn’t have a key,” I scoff, folding my arms tightly over my chest.

A silence falls over us as we stand there staring at one another, neither of us willing to be the first to back down. The look in his eyes is unnerving, but again, it isn’t that wild, unhinged mania from the first night. Instead, it’s the eerie calm– which I’m beginning to find even more frightening.

After a long moment, Roman wets his lips with his tongue, parting them to speak.

“Remember your place, wife ,” he snarls, his upper lip curling back from his teeth and the threat in his tone obvious.

“How could I forget, with your constant reminders?” I mutter.

He cuts me a final glare before turning around and storming off, bound for the black town car parked in the circle drive.

I glare daggers into his back, wishing I had a real one to throw right about now.

“Better come inside, ma’am,” Clara says, poking her head out the front door and gazing up at the sky. “It looks like rain.”

It rains all damn day. And since I'm stuck inside with only Clara for company, I decide to finally explore the interior of the mansion since it still feels like a maze that I can't quite figure out.

There are so many closed doors. I test the handles of each of them, finding that some are unlocked, and as I poke around the first floor of the house, I encounter some truly bizarre things. Like the ballroom— an actual ballroom , can you believe that?! It's enormous, draped in black like the rest of the house and boasting a bar on each end. A beautifully painted mural of the night sky decorates the vaulted ceiling, and while I can't imagine a room like this gets much use, the fact that it even exists in this place screams wealth and opulence in a way that I can't even wrap my head around.

I grew up with money, but judging by this castle that I now call home, my husband is filthy rich. Every inch of this home's interior has been updated or meticulously maintained, although I'd venture to guess that most of the rooms are rarely used.

Like the library— there's literally a goddamn library full of books, two stories high with a balcony wrapping around the second level. I've never been a voracious reader, but with this many books at my disposal, I might have to start.

The adjacent study is just as gorgeous, lined with mahogany bookshelves and complete with a couple of cozy sofas set across from each other in front of a large stone fireplace. A scratching noise catches my attention, drawing my eyes toward a set of French doors where two very wet dogs are peering in at me through the glass, seeking entry. I light up when I see them, unable to keep the smile off my face as I

wrestle with the lock and pull one of the doors open.

“Hi, babies!” I exclaim as they push inside, immediately dropping down to love up on them. They leave muddy pawprints on my leggings as they climb up to lick my face, seemingly just as excited to see me as I am, them.

“Were you guys cold out there in the rain, hmm?” I coo, scratching their ears as they compete for my attention.

I snap my head around at the sound of a throat clearing behind me, my eyes landing on Clara standing in the doorway to the study.

“Mr. Volkov doesn’t like the dogs to come in the house,” she says, giving me a pointed look.

I huff out a sigh, rising to my feet and spinning around to face her. “Mister Volkov isn’t here right now, is he?” I challenge, folding my arms tightly over my chest as the dogs sniff around my feet. “I’m not sending them back out in the rain, that’s just inhumane.”

“They can go to the kennels if they want to keep dry,” Clara provides, but I just shake my head adamantly, dropping down into a crouch to give the twin shadows some more scratches underneath their collars.

“You boys will be good, won’t you?” I ask, earning a wet kiss on my cheek from Nox. I giggle, glancing back up at Clara. “See? They’ll be on their best behavior.”

She purses her lips, glaring at me with contempt, but I’m not about to back down on this. As sad as it is, the dogs are my only friends here. And if Roman doesn’t approve of them coming inside, I guess I’ll just have to deal with that later.

Clara turns on a heel with a huff, her Mary Janes clicking against the tile as she walks away.

I rise to my feet again, a surge of victory spearing through me. I may not be able to win a battle against my husband, but at least Clara will defer to me when he's not around. I'm not completely powerless here.

"So, what should we do, boys?" I ask, looking down at Nox and Vesper. The latter yawns, stretching out and dropping to his tummy, evidently aiming to take a nap now that he's someplace warm and dry.

I smile down at him, unable to resist stooping to give him one last pat before wandering over to the bookcases beside the fireplace and thumbing through the titles on the shelves.

Nox's toenails clip against the marble floor as he follows me, sniffing around and scoping the place out. Even though they can't talk back, it's nice to have the dogs around for company. It feels a little less lonely in this house with their presence.

None of the books capture my interest, but the bookshelf itself does. As I'm running my hands along the wood from one shelf to the other, I notice that the seam between the shelves to the right of the fireplace doesn't quite line up. I give it a little push, and to my surprise, it moves. Changing tact, I pull instead, sucking in a gasp when the whole shelf comes away from the wall to reveal a hidden doorway carved in the stone behind it. Wide steps beckon me down into the darkness, and I cast a wary glance at Nox, who's sitting at my feet and looking to me expectantly.

"The first rule of every horror movie is to not go down into the dark, creepy basement, right?" I ask him, my pulse picking up speed.

Nox just cocks his head to the side, his stumpy tail wagging.

I blow out a breath, turning back toward the hidden staircase and squinting down into the darkness. “Just a peek can’t hurt, right?”

Slowly, I start forward, stepping through the doorway and descending the stairs with caution. It’s pitch black down here, but the light from above provides some illumination, my eyes adjusting to the dark as I continue down the steps.

When I reach the bottom, I realize that I’m in a tunnel of some sort. I can’t see very far ahead of me, but I can tell that it branches off in two directions, both of them looking equally dark and foreboding. It’s cold and damp down here, and the whole place just gives me the heebie jeebies, so I don’t stick around to find out where the tunnels lead. Instead, I turn around and rush back up the stairs like the chicken shit I am, swinging the bookcase back over the opening and slumping back against it as I pant to catch my breath.

Nox whines, tilting his head as he peers up at me.

“It’s scary down there,” I tell him, shuddering. “Let’s stick to places where we can see daylight, hm?”

He moves closer, nudging his head against my hand, and I reward him with more scratches behind his ear.

“Maybe we should look for the entrance to the tower instead, whaddya think?” I ask, and Nox’s responding tail wag says he likes that idea.

I’ve been thinking about that odd-looking tower at the far corner of the house ever since I saw it from outside. It would definitely give me a better vantage point to scope out the property, and it might even be high enough to give me a view of the nearest road out of here, which will be crucial if and when I make my escape.

I whistle for Vesper as I head out of the study with Nox trotting along at my heels, and the other dog pushes up to his feet with a grunt and follows.

We pass by the dining room on our way to the foyer, the double-doors propped open and the room sitting vacant. One glance inside launches a kaleidoscope of memories in my mind that I wish I could forget. Like the way Roman forced me to sit on his lap while he fed me. Or how he shoved me face-down onto the table, growling threats into my ear.

I have no doubt he'd act on them. He already did last night, when he crept into my bed and touched me against my will. What's worse is that I'm honestly not sure which I'm angrier about— the way he forced himself on me, or the fact that he edged me within an inch of my life and then left me wanting. It's all way too much to unpack right now, so I just shove that messy tangle of thoughts to the back of my mind, focusing instead on finding how to get up into the damn tower.

Vesper and Nox follow dutifully at my heels as I move into the foyer and begin climbing the stairs, following the split in the staircase to the left, like always. I'm still curious as hell about what Roman's hiding in his wing of the house, but that's an adventure for another day. Right now, it's all about the tower— and since it's technically in my wing, I should have free reign of it if I can discover how to get in.

Along my way down the hall, I peek inside the other rooms lining the west wing, finding nothing but guest suites. It's actually a little disappointing, considering all the cool spaces I managed to discover downstairs. There's no ballroom or library or secret passageway up here, just a series of empty bedrooms. Boring .

The final door at the end of the hallway leads into a small sitting room with an arched wooden door along the far wall, and I'm willing to bet that it's the exact entrance I've been looking for. The dogs trot into the room and start sniffing around while I head straight for that door, turning the old iron knob and pushing hard to get it open.

The hinges creak in protest when it finally gives, a drafty chill hitting me in the face as it swings wide to reveal another creepy stone staircase behind it. This one's circular, twisting upwards like the inside of a shell. I hiss out an excited "Yes!" as I step inside, blinking to adjust to the dim light filtering in through a stained-glass window halfway up the stairs. There's no handrail, so I trail my fingers along the stone wall as I start climbing them, up and around until I finally come upon a matching arched door at the top, made of the same heavy old wood as the one below.

My heart momentarily sinks, but then I twist the knob to discover that this one is unlocked, too. Must be my lucky day. I throw my shoulder against it to push it open, and the hinges creak as it gives way to reveal a small, circular room.

There's nothing inside it, but there is a window. Or at least there was . I can't help but feel disappointed when I see it's been boarded up, a chilly draft whistling in between the planks of wood.

The wood itself looks fresh, noticeably out of place in this room that feels like it's from another time. I'd probably need a tool of some sort to try to pry a board off and look out from the window, but I approach it nonetheless to investigate whether any of the gaps between the boards are large enough to see through.

One of them is— just barely. I have to press up on my tiptoes to peek through, but it gives me a bird's eye view of the estate below. I can see the perfectly clipped lawn, the roof of the garden shed, the hedges... I blink my eyes, heart pounding faster as I take in how far the hedges extend beyond the border of the lawn. They don't just line the far side of the property— they twist and wind, forming what looks to be a maze.

The little click click click of the dogs' nails against the floor draws my attention, and I turn to see them trotting toward me, tongues lolling out.

"What are you guys doing up here?" I laugh, stepping away from the window and

bending down to greet them.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

I bolt upright at the sound of Roman’s voice, finding him standing in the doorway to the stairs, his large frame eating up the entire width of it.

I wasn’t expecting him back so soon. He’s usually gone all day when he leaves the house.

“What are you doing?” he demands, and my throat tightens in fear when I see the look in his eyes.

He looks mad.

Crazed.

Dangerous.

This is the side of him I fear; the one that’s terrifyingly unpredictable.

“I was just exploring,” I say shakily, backing up a step. I glance down at the dogs, both watching me with their heads cocked, as if the traitors didn’t just lead my monster right to me.

“You shouldn’t be up here,” Roman growls, advancing on me predatorily. I keep backing up, but his long strides bring him one step closer for every two of mine in retreat, until my back hits the stone wall and I’ve got nowhere else to go. He crowds me in, snatching up both my wrists in one large hand and yanking them up over my head, wrapping his other palm around my throat.

The dogs whine, but they don't make any attempt to intervene. I suppose I don't blame them. Roman looks completely unhinged, his chest rising and falling with his ragged breathing as he presses in tightly against me, bringing his face so close that the tips of our noses brush.

"Stay out of this tower," he snarls, shoving a knee between my legs.

"B-but, this is my wing, isn't it?" I stutter, searching for some passable excuse to calm the raging beast within my husband.

"Not this part of it."

"Can you just give me a map with places I'm not allowed to go or something?" I huff, squirming against him in an effort to get free, the bones in my wrists grinding together painfully. "Because this is getting really confusing. I was only told to stay out of the east wing, not..."

He cuts me off by grabbing my chin, pinching my cheeks together harshly as he glowers at me. "Why do you insist on misbehaving?"

"I... I..." I babble dumbly, suddenly unable to form a coherent sentence. Probably in part due to how hard he's pinching my cheeks together right now.

With his other hand, he suddenly releases my wrists, yanking one of my arms down and pressing my palm right against the firm bulge in the front of his pants. "Do you need to be fucked into submission?"

If I wasn't at a loss for words before, I am now. His cock twitches against my palm, the sheer size of it making my throat tighten in intimidation. Roman's arrogant, aloof demeanor oozes big dick energy, and now I know for sure he's got the anatomy to back it up.

He finally lets go of my face, sliding his hand down to wrap around my throat once more. “I’ll bet you’ve been thinking about how good it’s going to feel when I rip through your virginity, haven’t you, pet?” he taunts, deviance flaring in his eyes as he flexes his grip around my throat, applying controlled pressure until he’s restricting my air slightly. “Remember what I said about pain and pleasure?”

I glare back at him, the way he calls me ‘pet’ making my skin crawl. I start struggling against him again in a feeble attempt to free myself from his clutches. He’s still holding my palm firmly against his erection, and I cringe as I feel it jump with excitement in response to my struggle. Then he suddenly releases my hand, and I snatch it away with a gasp of relief.

That relief is horribly short-lived.

With one hand still firmly wrapped around my throat, Roman drops his other to his belt, unfastening it with a metallic clink. A shudder runs through me at the sound of the teeth of his zipper separating as he drags it down, those penetrating green eyes still locked firmly on mine. “Let’s just get this over with, shall we?” he asks gruffly, an edge of annoyance in his tone. He pauses freeing his cock to grab me roughly between the legs, and I suck in a sharp gasp as my body responds by sending a surge of heat straight to my core.

Roman begins rubbing his fingers back and forth against my clit as I mentally curse the thin fabric of my leggings and panties— and I’m honestly not sure if it’s because I hate that can feel so much through them, or because they’re a barrier to his touch that some part of me inexplicably craves.

“Virgins always scream so beautifully,” he muses to himself, tapping his fingers against my clit once more before he withdraws his hand, shoving it down the front of his boxer briefs to grip his cock.

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m not a virgin,” I rasp, my airway still partially restricted by his hold on my throat.

His brow lifts in surprise and he flinches back slightly, searching my eyes like he’s trying to spot my lie. “That’s not what your father said.”

“He probably also said I was obedient,” I snort, pressing my palms to his chest and trying to shove him back. He’s like a brick wall; hard and firm and immovable. “Let me go,” I grit out.

Roman calmly slides his hand out of his underwear, smirking as he leans in and darts out his tongue to lick a line up the column of my throat, ending just below my ear. He grabs me between the legs again as he nips my earlobe with his teeth and whispers, “Never .”

But then he does– at least physically.

All at once, his hands release me, the heat of his body leaving mine as he takes a step backwards. Some twisted part of me aches at the loss of contact, keening for him to crowd me in close again, and I hate myself for it.

For most of my life, I’ve been isolated. Starved for touch. The way my body reacts to him– the erratic pounding of my heart, the breathlessness in my lungs, the heat pooling between my legs– is a purely biological response, nothing more.

My husband is a monster.

He zips his fly and refastens his belt, then adjusts his cuffs boredly, as if he didn’t just have me pinned against the wall while forcing me to touch his dick and threatening to rape me.

“Come.”

Both dogs perk up at his command, and the fact that I’m about to follow it like I’m one of them makes my stomach churn with nausea.

Roman turns on a heel, and I begrudgingly follow him out of the circular room at the top of the tower, down the spiral staircase, and back into the room below. When we emerge from the eerie stone stairwell, he closes the door tightly behind us, pausing to pull a brass key from his pocket and turn it in the lock. Then he just passes by me as if I’m not even here, whistling for the dogs to follow as he leaves the room.

This time, I don’t join them in obeying his command. I remain frozen in place, heart pounding, lungs aching in my struggle to catch my breath.

No matter what it takes, I have to escape this place.

I will escape.

10

Clara has me dress in black again for dinner tonight.

I'm not sure what to make of that after the fuss about dressing in red on my first night, but I'm too emotionally drained to put up a fight for the sake of asserting my independence. So, I just go along with it like a good wife, playing the role I've been ascribed to.

There aren't any specific instructions for my hair or makeup this time, so I just apply a little bit of bronzer and mascara and sweep my hair up into a long ponytail, which actually looks killer with the one-shoulder gown she picked out for me. There's a slit cut up the left side almost all the way to my hip, flashing an obscene amount of leg as the fabric shifts with my strides. The heels Clara selected to go with the dress are sky-high and uncomfortable as hell, but I put them on nonetheless, and when she glances over to survey my appearance as I descend the staircase and gives her nod of approval, a wave of relief washes over me.

I'm still a little shaken after the way Roman handled me in the tower today. I won't be stepping a toe out of line during this dinner for fear of meeting his wrath. It's become abundantly clear that my husband holds all the cards, and he won't hesitate to make me suffer if I don't learn to play by his rules.

Clara scurries off—presumably to resume dinner preparations—while I make my way through the halls of the first floor to the dining room. The doors are pulled open, but the room itself is still vacant. I pause in the threshold for a moment, swallowing past the lump in my throat as I stare at the place settings on the table, remembering how

Roman roughly bent me over the surface last time we dined here together.

Will he force me to sit on his lap for our meal again tonight?

I clutch a hand to my chest, swaying slightly on my high heels as I fight to shore up my composure.

Play along, Eliza.

That's all I have to do until I can find a way out of this nightmare. I'll play the role of the good little wife that Roman wants me to be, just so I can survive long enough to find the means to escape him.

The soft sound of voices draws my attention further down the hall, and I glance in the direction they're emanating from to find one of the doors that was locked earlier now standing ajar, a soft light spilling from inside. And because I'm far too curious for my own good, I back out of the dining room and pivot to continue down the corridor, stepping as quietly as I can in my heels as I creep up to the door and strain to hear the hushed voices from within.

One of them is definitely Roman's— I'd recognize that deep, gravelly voice anywhere. I can't tell who he's talking to, but it's apparent from the harshness in his tone that he's arguing with whoever it is.

There's suddenly a loud thud from inside the room and I jump, skittering away like a frightened mouse. I nearly trip over my own feet in my haste to flee down the hallway, heels clicking against the marble floor all the way back to the dining room. I dip inside the doorway as soon as I reach it, tucking around the corner to sag back against one of the doors and pressing a palm over my chest in an effort to calm my racing heart.

Though it's difficult to hear anything over the blood pounding in my ears, I listen intently for the sound of footsteps in the hall, wilting in relief when I realize nobody's coming after me. I take a few seconds to catch my breath, then push away from the door, crossing the room to take the seat I occupied last time. Before my husband forced me to sit on his lap and be fed like a pet, that is.

I stare down at the wooden surface of the tabletop, my fingers twitching nervously in my lap as I wait for Roman to join me. My eyes trail over the knife on the right side of my place setting, continuing up to the glass of white wine resting just above it. Decisions, decisions. After another few minutes pass, I reach for the glass and take a few big sips of wine to steady my nerves, draining half of it. Time slips by agonizingly slowly, and the wine in my glass is almost gone when my husband finally appears in the doorway, barely even glancing my way as he strides into the dining room.

Roman Volkov is the kind of man who commands a room as soon as he steps inside. There's just this powerful aura about him that immediately draws your attention and holds it— and despite my growing disdain for my new husband, I can't look away as he sweeps in and heads for his seat at the far end of the table, beside mine.

The first thing I notice is that he's changed his suit— or at least the shirt beneath it. I'm certain he was wearing a black shirt earlier, but the one he has on now is a crisp white. He must change his clothes for dinner each night, too, and something about that thought endears me to him, albeit slightly.

The second thing I notice is the look on his face. His brow is furrowed, his lips pinched together in a scowl. He's obviously mad about something, which doesn't bode well for me if our prior interactions are anything to go by.

He takes his seat without a word, unbuttoning his suit jacket and straightening his cuffs. Then Clara breezes into the room with a plate of food in each hand, rounding

the table to set one in front of Roman, the other in front of me. He doesn't thank her—just gives a curt nod of dismissal after the food is placed before us, arranging his napkin on his lap and picking up his silverware.

His continued silence is unnerving.

I carefully lift my own napkin, my mouth watering as I take in the meal on the plate in front of me. There's a beautiful filet of roasted salmon, spears of asparagus, and a hearty portion of whipped potatoes, sprinkled with chives. Roman has already started digging in, and after placing my napkin on my lap and lifting my fork, I start to do the same.

The silence persists, though. The scrape of our silverware against the plates is the only noise echoing through the large room, my anxiety spiking higher and higher until even my appetite is affected. I start pushing the food around my plate with my fork in an effort to appear occupied, trying to breathe past the tightening of my throat and the impending feeling of doom twisting in the pit of my stomach.

"What happened?" Roman asks, and I'm so startled to hear him speak that I flinch, snapping my head in his direction to find him eyeing the burn scars on my left bicep studiously, as if it's his first time seeing them.

"Car crash," I answer simply, my voice coming out strained. I clear my throat, tightening my grip on the fork in my hand as I watch his eyes skim over the mottled skin. "I know it's ugly," I mutter. "If you'd prefer I cover it up, I can wear sleeves."

"I assure you that your scars don't make you any less appealing," he replies curtly. His gaze lifts, those piercing green eyes locking with mine. "Your attitude, however..." he trails off and I feel a blush rise to my cheeks.

"I'm working on it," I say, quickly dropping my gaze back to my plate. "This is all

new to me. I'm trying to... adapt .”

“Hm,” he grunts.

Apparently he doesn't have anything else to say, because he falls silent again as I resume pushing my food around the plate with my fork, trying not to squirm beneath the weight of his stare burning into the side of my face.

“You need to eat,” he grumbles, evidently having noticed that I'm just playing with my food rather than consuming it. “You're too thin.”

I glance over to meet his eyes again, clenching my jaw. “Men shouldn't feel entitled to comment on women's bodies.”

“And women shouldn't starve themselves to achieve some impossible standard of beauty,” he deadpans, nodding down to my plate. “Now eat .”

His stern tone brooks no room for argument, and for the sole purpose of escaping the humiliation of being fed another meal by his hand, I comply, flaking off a piece of salmon onto my fork and bringing it to my lips.

Even though it's delicious, my stomach twists when I swallow it down, as if it's rioting at his directive. When I glance back over at Roman, he's still watching me, irritation bubbling up inside me in response to his scrutiny.

I set down my fork with a gentle click, lifting my napkin to wipe the corner of my mouth. “Is my stuff ever going to come?” I ask.

His brow furrows. “What?”

“When you brought me here, you said you'd arrange for my things to be delivered,” I

remind him. “They haven’t been.”

Roman stares at me for a long moment, the muscle in his tightly-clenched jaw feathering. “Is there something you’re lacking?”

“My laptop, my phone...”

“There’s a computer in the study, and there’s a phone in the hall.”

“I want my own,” I reply, unable to keep the edge of desperation out of my voice. “Plus, I’ve seen that dinosaur of a desktop you’ve got in the study. Can you even access the internet on that thing?”

He stares at me, his jaw ticking over. Then he drops his gaze to his plate with a sigh, spearing a piece of asparagus onto his fork. “Make a list,” he grumbles. “Give it to Clara, and I’ll see to it that Andrew gets you what you need.”

“Thank you,” I breathe, a whoosh of air leaving me and some of the tension draining from my shoulders. Though I’m not sure why I’m thanking him for something as simple as fulfilling his prior promise. If he’s trying to condition me to be dependent on him, it’s working.

I lift my fork again, picking at the potatoes on my plate. “Who was here earlier?” I ask, trying to sound casual.

He arches a brow in my direction as he swallows his bite of food. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“When I was coming in for dinner, I heard you talking to someone down the hall,” I say nonchalantly, setting my fork down and reaching for the glass of wine. There’s only a sip left, and I swallow it eagerly, setting the empty glass back down in front of

me.

“Business associates stop by from time to time,” he mutters.

I flinch as he drops his fork with a clatter, wiping his mouth off on his napkin. Then he rises from his seat, leaning forward to grab the bottle of wine off the table. He swivels toward me, tipping the neck of the bottle into my glass and refilling it, then sets the bottle back down, dropping into his chair again.

It’s a good thing he’s not looking this way, because I can’t contain the shock playing out on my face. That might’ve been the first nice thing my new husband has done for me. And the fact that it’s something as simple as refilling a glass of wine speaks volumes as to how this relationship is going.

“I occasionally take meetings in my office here,” Roman supplies as he rearranges his napkin on his lap.

“That’s the door down the hall?” I ask innocently, as if I wasn’t snooping on him before dinner. “Your office?”

“Yes.” He picks up his silverware and resumes eating, while I lift my newly refilled glass of wine and mull over his words.

If he takes meetings here, maybe I’ll recognize one of his business associates from my father’s dealings. A few of them were sweet on me. Maybe I could ask them for help, and that’d give me another potential option for getting out of here.

“But I didn’t see anyone leave,” I mumble, thinking aloud.

Roman glances over at me, arching a brow in question.

“You had a meeting in your office before dinner, but I didn’t see anyone else pass by this room,” I say, squinting my eyes in consideration. “They would’ve had to pass by here to get to the front door.”

“Niko knows his way around the manor,” Roman replies with an edge of annoyance. “Sometimes he goes out the back.”

“Oh.” I drop my gaze to my plate, shoulders slumping in disappointment. I don’t recall anyone who worked with my father called Niko.

“In any event, you don’t need to concern yourself with my business dealings,” he adds, shooting me a pointed look before returning to his dinner.

I force myself to eat a bit more of my own, gulping down the second glass of wine as the two of us dine in silence. Though there’s still a thick tension in the air and a sense of uneasiness hanging over me, the wine helps me relax a little. Enough to broach the topic of our run-in today up in the tower.

I set my wine glass back down in front of me, tracing my fingertip along the rim as I gaze over at him. “Roman, about earlier...”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” he says in a clipped tone, not even glancing up from his plate.

“I just think it’d be helpful if I knew where I can and can’t go. If I don’t know the rules, I can’t know whether or not I’m breaking them.”

He sighs, pushing back in his chair and wiping his mouth with his napkin. Then he turns to look at me, those intense green eyes meeting my own. “You’re not a prisoner here, Eliza. You have free reign of the property. The east wing, the tower, and my office on this level are off-limits to you. You’re free to wander anywhere else you’d

like. I'd rather you not venture into the woods surrounding the property, but if you insist on doing so, take the dogs with you for protection."

I stare at him dumbly.

"Speaking of the dogs, I believe I already said no table scraps, and I'd prefer they stay outdoors," he continues. "If you do insist on bringing them inside, try to be more thoughtful about the state of their paws. Clara spent half the afternoon cleaning muddy prints off the floors."

"Yeah, I can do that," I agree, nodding emphatically. "Anything else?"

"Eat your food."

I slouch back in my chair, glaring down at my plate. "But I'm not hungry."

"I don't care. You're far too thin, and I won't have my business associates thinking I've been neglecting your basic needs."

I dart a scowl in his direction. "Maybe I just have a fast metabolism."

"Don't think I haven't noticed how little you eat."

My cheeks burn and I quickly look away, gritting my teeth.

So he has been watching me. I'd perceived his cold detachment toward me as indifference, but the fact that he's been paying attention is somewhat alarming. It means I'll need to be more careful with the plans I'm making so he doesn't pick up on my intentions.

Play along.

Begrudgingly, I lift my fork, not casting my husband another glance as I force myself to finish my dinner. Though his own plate is clean, he lingers in the room until I fork the last bite into my mouth, at which point he abruptly pushes out his chair and rises to stand.

He leaves the dining room without a word.

11

I wake with a start. My bedroom is shrouded in darkness, shadows clinging to the corners and eating up the space beyond my bed, but I feel someone there. I dart a glance toward the door to find that it's closed, the chair I pushed in front of it still in place with the chairback tucked beneath the handle. By every indication, nobody has entered, but I swear I can sense someone else's presence in here with me.

I hold my breath, straining my ears to listen for any sound. The silence is deafening, but then there's a creak of the floorboards, a flicker of movement in the shadows.

I dive beneath the covers, pulling them up over my face.

Nobody's there. This isn't real. Maybe I'm dreaming.

My heart races, my breath coming out in short, ragged pants.

Nobody's there. Just go back to sleep, Eliza.

I regulate my breathing and slowly, my pulse calms. Some of the tension drains from my muscles. I lower the covers from my face, peering into the darkness again.

There's nothing there.

The next morning begins much like every other one has since I moved into the devil's mansion. I'm woken by the sound of a key scraping in the door lock, followed by Clara grumbling under her breath in annoyance as she struggles to push it open.

The legs of the chair I placed in front of the door screech against the hardwood floor as it swings wide, Clara casting an irritated glance toward the offending piece of furniture as she enters with my breakfast tray.

She crosses the room to set the tray down on the table, then proceeds to throw open every damn curtain, bathing the room in light. I sit up in bed, rubbing my eyes with a groan as she pours my coffee. Then I force myself to get up, lured out from the comfort of the fluffy bedding by the promise of caffeine.

Clara retrieves the chair from behind the door and drags it back over to the table, proceeding to set up my breakfast while I stretch my limbs and wander closer. Today's breakfast is an omelet and cubed potatoes in addition to the typical baskets of fruit and pastries. I'm only interested in the coffee.

As I take my seat at the table and reach for the mug, I notice there's something else on my breakfast tray today that hasn't been there in the past— a little white paper bag with the top folded over. Clara ducks into my closet to select my outfit for the day before I can ask her what it is, so I proceed to investigate myself, carefully picking up the bag, opening it, and peering inside.

Dog biscuits.

I'm not sure if it's meant as an insult, since Roman keeps referring to me as his pet , or as a gesture since he's caught me feeding his dogs twice now. Either way, I fold the top of the bag back over with a smile, glad to have something to offer the pups that I won't get in trouble for.

“The doctor is coming to see you this morning,” Clara informs me as she breezes out of my closet with a neat little stack of clothes in her hands, her Mary Janes clipping against the floor as she strides past me toward the bed.

“For what?” I ask, twisting at the waist to watch after her.

She places the stack on the end of the bed. “Just a checkup, I’m sure,” she murmurs as she spins back around to face me with a bland expression. “He’ll be here soon, so you might want to get dressed,” she adds curtly, looking me over. “I’ll be back for the laundry.”

Before I have a chance to question her further, she’s already halfway to the door, making a hasty exit. The latch snicks closed behind her, and I’m left alone to wonder what fresh hell awaits me with this unexpected doctors’ visit.

My mind runs wild as I gulp down my coffee, then hastily get myself ready for the day. I took a long bath before bed last night, and my hair’s still a little damp as I slip out of my pajamas and put on the clothes from the stack at the end of my bed. I’m combing my fingers through the strands to try to tame them when there’s a knock at my door, Clara reappearing with an aged man in a white coat.

“This is Doctor Hargrove,” she provides, gesturing toward the old man as he follows her into my room.

He’s short and stout, with a full head of white hair and a pair of wire-framed glasses resting on the bridge of his nose. His dark eyes are kind, crinkling at the corners as he offers me a warm smile. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Volkov,” he says, extending a hand as I approach cautiously.

I place mine in his, giving it a shake. “Likewise.”

“I’ll leave you to your exam,” Clara quips as she hastily shuffles out of the room again.

As soon as she closes the door, my eyes snap back to the doctor, narrowing in

suspicion. “What’s this all about?” I ask.

“Mr. Volkov asked that I examine you,” he states, shifting his leather medical bag in front of him. “It’s just the usual tests, ma’am. I’ll be taking your vitals, drawing some blood, checking for STD’s, pregnancy...”

“He thinks I’m pregnant?!” I screech, eyes flying wide.

“It’s just standard, ma’am,” Dr. Hargrove reassures.

“Standard for what?”

He stares back at me, deadpan, and realization slams into me like a ton of bricks.

“How many other women has he had you examine here?” I question, my shrill tone betraying my mounting agitation over this situation.

“That’s really not for me to say, ma’am,” he replies quietly, the leather handle of his bag creaking beneath his knuckles as he adjusts his grip on it uncomfortably. “I’m just here for the exam and the testing. The sooner we get that completed, the sooner I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Fine,” I huff, folding my arms over my chest indignantly. Though rage is simmering beneath my veins, if I pitch a fit, it’ll undermine any progress I’ve made thus far. I need to play along with whatever sick game my husband is playing if I’m to have any hope of escaping him. “Let’s just get it over with, then,” I grit out.

Dr. Hargrove visibly relaxes, his shoulders sagging as some of the tension drains from his muscles. “Excellent,” he breathes, the warm smile he entered with returning to his face as he turns at the waist and gestures toward my bed. “Shall we?”

Following his directive, I stomp over to the bed, conveying my dissatisfaction with every heavy footstep against the wood floor. I sink down to sit on the edge while the doctor drags a chair over and places it in front of me. He takes a seat and opens his medical bag, pulling out a clipboard before returning his gaze to me, clicking his pen and sitting back.

Dr. Hargrove proceeds to ask me some basic information about my age, height, weight, and medical history, jotting down notes as we go. Then his questioning takes a sharp turn.

“Prior sexual partners?” he asks absently.

“One,” I answer.

“Male or female?”

“Male.” I shift my weight on the bed, frowning. “Is that information really necessary?”

“It’s all standard, ma’am,” he replies blandly, the tip of his pen scratching against the paper as he records my response. Then he shifts the clipboard over to rest on one knee, reaching down into his bag to pull out a long object and handing it over.

I take it from him, staring down at the branding on the wrapper. First Response. It’s a damn pregnancy test.

“I assume you know how those work,” he says, gesturing toward it. “Go ahead to the restroom, hold the tip under your urine stream for a few seconds, and...”

“Seriously?” I interrupt, teeth clenching as I tighten my fist around the test stick.

His blue eyes meet mine, rounded in sincerity. If I didn't know better, I'd think this guy might feel sorry for me right now. "I can't place your birth control implant until I confirm you're not currently pregnant."

I flinch back, furrowing my brow. "I don't need birth control, I'm not-"

I snap my mouth closed, my blood running cold as a chilling realization sinks into my bones.

Roman intends to fuck me.

That's the real reason the doctor is here.

I'm not sure why I deluded myself into thinking he wouldn't make me his wife in every sense of the word; that he'd spare me from the physical act of consummating our marriage. Roman Volkov is a man who's used to getting what he wants. He will fuck me if that's what he desires, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

"I... fine," I concede with a resigned sigh, feeling a little lightheaded from the stress of the situation as I push up from the edge of the bed, clutching the pregnancy test tighter in my fist as I force myself to walk to the bathroom. I close the door for privacy, pee on the damn thing, then wash my hands and bring it back to the doctor, not even bothering to look at the result. I already know what it's going to say.

I hand over the stick to Dr. Hargrove pee side first— though he doesn't seem particularly bothered, as he's now donning a pair of blue latex gloves. He reaches out to take it, lowering the test in front of him to read the result on the window.

"Not pregnant," he confirms.

"Obviously," I mutter.

“We can place the implant, then.” He rises from his seat, peeling off the latex gloves to replace them with a new pair and gesturing to the bed. “Go ahead and sit back down. It’ll go in your left upper arm, so just slip off that sleeve for me.”

I shuffle past him, sinking down onto the edge of the bed and slipping off my cardigan. Dr. Hargrove bends over to rummage in his bag, then straightens, turning back toward me.

“I’ll be placing it in your inner bicep,” he says, pausing as his gaze drops to my arm. His eyes widen slightly as he takes in the grotesque scar, but he quickly schools his expression, continuing. “It goes between the muscle, so there’s some mild discomfort when placing it, but in a day or two, you’ll forget it’s even there.”

Dr. Hargrove has me lie down on the bed, arranging my arm so it’s up beside my head with the underside of my bicep exposed to him. Then he uses the applicator to place the implant, draws three vials of blood from my inner elbow, and moves back, peeling off his latex gloves.

“Now I’ll step out for a moment,” he says, slipping his supplies back into his medical bag. “Undress from the waist down and cover yourself with the sheet, then call for me when you’re ready.”

“What?” I screech, jerking upright with a start.

“I need to swab your cervix.”

“No!”

Doctor or not, I refuse to willingly spread my legs for any man in this house.

He frowns. “Ma’am...”

“I’ve had sex with one person, one time,” I say, folding my arms over my chest protectively and pinning Dr. Hargrove with a glare. “We used a condom. If my husband is so concerned about catching something from me, then he can keep his dick to himself.”

He sighs, shaking his head. “I’m not trying to upset you, Mrs. Volkov. I’m just following your husband’s orders. If you don’t let me complete my exam...”

“No!” I repeat, raising my voice louder. “I’m not doing it! So, unless you plan on holding me down and forcing me to submit to your examination , we’re finished here.” I lift my chin with a scowl. “You can go, Doctor .”

He heaves another sigh, but must realize that there’s no talking me into it, because he doesn’t make another attempt to try to convince me. Dr. Hargrove just shakes his head, casting me a resentful glance as he stuffs the rest of his things into his medical bag and closes it, lifting it off the floor.

“I’ll go, but I’m sure I’ll be back,” he comments bitterly as he turns away and strides toward the door, his movements stiff as the tension returns to his muscles.

I bite back my retort, still fuming over the entire ordeal as I watch him leave.

Good riddance.

Following Dr. Hargrove's departure, I don't leave my room to wander the manor grounds as I'd originally planned. I don't bring the little bag of treats to the dogs or explore the hedge maze I spotted from the tower. Instead, I just lie in bed, my stomach twisted in knots and a feeling of revulsion taking root inside me as I consider the true purpose of the doctor's visit and what it means for this sham of a marriage I've found myself trapped in.

My husband wants to fuck me.

He will fuck me, and there isn't a damned thing I can do about it. When I signed that marriage license, it was as good as a transfer of ownership from my father to Roman Volkov. Once he confirms I have a clean bill of health, he'll claim what's his—whether I like it or not.

I won't like it. Despite my body's betrayal the night he snuck in my bed and forced his hand between my legs, I know I won't, because it's him. I'm as terrified of Roman as I am attracted to the man, and while I may be required to perform my wifely duties for him, I won't be deriving any enjoyment out of dancing with the devil.

The door to my room creaks open, and I glance over to see Clara coming in with a laundry hamper grasped in her hands. Her eyes widen in surprise when she sees I'm still in here wallowing, then her lips turn down in a disapproving frown as she marches toward me.

“Get out of bed, it’s almost noon,” she scolds, stooping to pick up my silk pajama set from the floor at the foot of the bed. “You’re having lunch with Mr. Volkov today in the dining room, he’s expecting you in ten minutes.”

My throat tightens in panic, my fingers twisting the bedsheets in my grip. “Ten minutes from now ?” I rasp, forcing the words past the lump in my throat.

Clara straightens, flicking me an annoyed glance. “Yes, you’ll be dining at noon ,” she replies impatiently. “Now go on, I can’t make your bed with you still in it.”

I’m not sure what crawled up Clara’s ass today, but she’s even more prickly than usual and I don’t have the energy right now to fight back. With a heavy sigh, I force myself up and out of bed, striding past her to the bathroom to freshen up before heading downstairs.

When I emerge, Clara’s lingering right outside the bathroom door with a hanger in her grasp. “Change into this,” she directs, thrusting the crimson-colored garment at me. “Red lips.”

“I threw away the red lipstick,” I mutter as I eye the dress dangling from the hanger, my nose wrinkling in distaste.

“Who do you think empties the wastebaskets?” she scoffs, shoving the hanger into my chest so I have no choice but to take it from her. “I put them back in your vanity.”

I grind my molars as she turns on a heel and walks away, fighting an internal battle with myself over whether to comply. Bucking the system didn’t work out too well for me the first night. If something as simple as putting on a dress and lipstick makes my life here a little easier, I’d probably be wise to choose my battles.

That doesn’t mean I don’t curse his name while changing my clothes and painting my

lips.

I'm immediately on edge when I leave the safety of my bedroom, anxiety sinking its claws in deep and refusing to let go. With each step down the stairs, my heart thumps harder, my palms going clammy against the stone banister and a shiver racing up my spine.

We haven't had lunch together at the manor before. Roman's typically gone during the day, and I've taken to eating lunch alone in the parlor, watching the dogs run around the lawn through the large picture windows. The dining room is dark and windowless. Nothing about it is inviting, and as I make my way from the foyer down the hall, every step closer only ramps up the urge to turn and run.

I will run, just not yet . Not now .

Now, I'll join my husband for lunch, dressed exactly how he likes. I'll sit in the chair beside him and engage in polite conversation, and I won't talk back or even give him grief about the unwelcomed doctor's visit. I'll do what I have to in the name of self-preservation until I can make a clean getaway.

Finding my resolve, I step into the dining room with my head held high, only for every ounce of confidence to drain out of me as soon as I lock eyes with the man seated at the head of the table. My husband's penetrating green-eyed stare is harsh and unwavering, and I immediately know this isn't going to be a quiet, uneventful meal like our last one together was, because the man sitting there isn't the Roman from last night.

It's the Roman from the tower. The angry, volatile fracture of his personality that makes my blood turn to ice in my veins with a single glance. I grind to a halt in the doorway, my breath catching and my heart stuttering in my chest.

The corner of his mouth quirks up in amusement at my reaction. “Come here, pet,” he commands, leaning back in his chair and patting a palm against his thigh.

Though everything inside me is screaming to turn around and run, I drag in a deep breath, shore up what’s left of my bravado, and begin striding over to the far end of the table where he’s seated. I falter a step when the grandfather clock in the hall begins to chime, the ominous tone creating a fitting backdrop for my death march. Roman’s eyes drop to tour my form as I draw closer, mapping out every inch of me until I come to a stop beside his chair and his gaze pings up to meet mine.

I barely move. Barely breathe. I just stand there frozen, waiting for him to tell me what he wants.

He pats his thigh again, dipping his chin in command.

I cringe internally, physically unable to force myself to move. This is all too familiar, far too reminiscent of that first dinner here in this room. I remain frozen, rooted to the spot I’m standing in, paralyzed by the mental whiplash.

Roman reaches out to snatch my wrist with an impatient grunt and yanks me down onto his lap. All the air leaves my lungs on impact, my muscles going rigid, but he ignores my obvious discomfort as he effortlessly repositions me to his liking, shifting my body around like his personal ragdoll until I’m sitting sideways and he can see my face. He stares into my eyes intently, reaching up to thumb my lower lip as his own part to speak.

“You didn’t cooperate with the doctor today,” he muses, his gaze dropping to track the sweeping movement of his digit against my lip.

“I submitted to the pregnancy and blood tests,” I say quietly, my lips brushing the pad of his thumb with every hushed word. “I allowed him to place the implant. I just

wasn't comfortable with the... other examination."

"That's fine," Roman murmurs.

My brows shoot up in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes, you can submit to the exam when you're ready," he says blandly, still watching my mouth as he pushes his thumb inside. "In the meantime, you've got other holes I can use."

I immediately recoil, spitting out his thumb as I flinch back, but Roman doesn't seem deterred by my blatant disgust for him. He just sighs in annoyance, tipping his head. "On your knees, pet."

I gape at him in disbelief. He can't possibly expect me to service him here and now, can he?

I get my answer when he abruptly takes me by the shoulders and shoves me from his lap to my knees. I wince as they hit the cold marble floor, a brief shot of pain vibrating through my shins.

"You're going to show me what a good girl you can be, aren't you?" he asks, lifting a hand from my shoulder to my cheek with the backs of his knuckles.

I want to scream, spit at him, tell him I won't do it... but all I do is glare up at the demon seated before me, my hatred simmering beneath my skin like a living, breathing entity.

The mirth in my eyes only seems to excite him. A smirk pulls at the corner of his lips as he leans his face down closer to my own, taking my chin between his thumb and forefinger. "I see that fire in your eyes, darling," he growls, the low, husky vibration

of his voice rattling through me like a warning. “I see how much you want to fight me right now, but you’re not going to, are you?”

He slides his thumb up my chin, slipping it past my lips and pressing the pad of it down against my tongue, forcing my mouth open. “No, you’re going to be a good little pet and suck my cock because you want to please me. You want to make it good for me.” He retracts his thumb from my mouth, trailing saliva over the curve of my chin and down the column of my neck. “You want me to come down that pretty little throat of yours so you can swallow every drop, don’t you?”

No.

“If that’s what you want,” I whisper, and a little piece inside of me cracks.

I can’t say no to him, though— not if I value my own wellbeing. If I resist, Roman will only force me into compliance. He’ll make this worse than it has to be. He’ll make it hurt.

Not to mention the fact that if I have any hope of escaping this hellhole, then I need to lead him to believe I’ve accepted my role as his wife. A blowjob is a small price to pay for my freedom, in the grand scheme of things. There’s no white knight on his way here to save me from the big bad wolf. I’ll just have to save myself.

Roman nods his approval, stroking a hand over my hair as he gazes down at me reverently, those piercing green eyes glinting in satisfaction. “Good girl.”

Something inside me lights up at his praise, my stomach immediately curling in on itself at the realization. I hate that my body and mind can’t get on the same page. I’m not sure who I despise more right now— my husband, or myself.

I startle at the familiar sound of Clara’s Mary Janes clipping against the floor and try

to push up from my knees, but Roman's hand on my shoulder keeps me firmly anchored in place as she crosses the room to deliver the plates of food. Mortification burns through me as she stoops to lower both plates onto the table in front of Roman, averting her eyes to avoid looking at me crouched between his knees.

"Can I get you anything else, Mr. Volkov?" she asks politely.

Embarrassment and anger wage a war inside me as I kneel at Roman's feet, staring up at the housemaid. Her refusal to acknowledge my existence right now makes her complicit in this whole thing— I think I might hate her the most.

"No, that'll be all, Clara," he replies in a clipped tone, his fingers idly toying with the strands of my hair. "Please close the doors on your way out."

"Of course, Mr. Volkov." She spins around and hurries away while I hold my breath until I hear the thud of the double doors being pulled closed behind her.

Roman gazes down at me with a faint smile, sweeping the sides of his suit coat back as he reclines in his chair, spreading his knees wider. "Go on," he urges, nodding down at the sizable bulge pressing against his slacks.

My cheeks burn with humiliation, my breath still coming out in staccato pants. I once again have the urge to scream, to spit, to throw something— but I swallow all of that back, tucking my rage away in a little box in my mind as my shaky hands reach for his belt.

My wrist brushes against his cock as my fingers land on the buckle, and I swear I feel it jump with excitement. As I work to unfasten his belt, I bump it again, his breath hitching.

I glance up at Roman to find his expression twisted, almost as if he's in pain. Like

he's aching for me to touch him right now.

Perhaps I do have some power here on my knees, after all.

I unbutton his slacks and drag down the zipper, my eyes dropping to take in the outline of his thick length straining against the fabric of his black boxer briefs. Shifting the hem of his shirt up to reach for the waistband, my gaze snags on his sculpted lower abs and the thin trail of dark hair starting at his belly button and disappearing beneath the elastic, my tongue darting out to wet my lips. Liquid heat starts to swirl inside me, rushing to my core as I slowly ease his boxers down and free his erection.

It's long and thick, standing at attention as I reach out to wrap a hand around his girth. I've only seen and touched one dick before in real life, but that experience did nothing to prepare me for this one. Wesley was half the size of my husband. Roman's cock is hot and hard in my palm as I stroke him from base to tip, mesmerized by the sight of it. When I glance up at his face, I find him watching me with rapt fascination.

I bat my lashes demurely, licking my lips again. "I haven't done this before," I admit.

He likes that. Delight flickers in his eyes as he reaches down to cup my chin in a hand, tilting my head up. "I'm sure you'll be a natural," he remarks, his voice strained as I continue pumping him in my fist. "This mouth of yours has to be good for something other than talking back."

I bite back my surge of indignation in response to his insult as he shifts his hand to the back of my head, guiding me down over his lap. I angle his tip toward my lips, taking it between them and swirling my tongue over the velvety crown.

A shuddering breath leaves him, so I do it again, the repeated movement of my tongue eliciting a similar response. He likes that, too. I'm mentally cataloging every

reaction, determined to get something out of this debasement. If I learn what he likes, I can make this end quickly. Maybe I can find some way to use it against him.

Roman rapidly grows impatient, sinking his hand into my hair and forcing me down over his shaft. I sputter and choke as he makes me take every inch of him, until the smooth head of his cock bumps the back of my throat and my lips kiss the base. Then he yanks me back off by my hair, and I barely have time to suck in a greedy gulp of oxygen before he's shoving my head down again, thrusting his hips up.

"Fuck," he curses, his grip on my hair tightening as he chokes me with his massive cock. "Your mouth is even better than I imagined, pet."

He relinquishes his hold on my hair, but I keep bobbing up and down over his lap at the same rhythm he set, my eyes watering and my mascara tracking paths down my cheeks. It's getting harder to ignore the needy pulse thrumming between my own legs, and it's all I can do to squeeze my thighs together tightly in an effort to alleviate it as I continue sucking his cock, slurping and choking around his girth.

Roman sweeps my hair away from my face with his fingertips, holding it back as he gazes down at me. "I wish you could see how pretty you look right now, sucking your master's cock like a good little slut," he murmurs. "My perfect pet."

A fresh surge of heat rushes to my core, the spark igniting to a flame at his degradation and praise. I drink it in like oxygen, flattening my tongue against the underside of his cock and dragging it up, flicking the tip just beneath the head.

He really likes that. His whole body jolts, his knuckles whitening against the armrest of the chair. I press my thighs together tighter, a little moan vibrating in my throat, and he groans again, snapping his hips up and thrusting in deeper.

Shit. I don't know why this act is having such a physical effect on me, but I need it to

stop. I refuse to derive any enjoyment out of being forced to my knees.

Putting together everything he's reacted strongly to thus far, I give him all I've got as I go for the grand finale. I lick and suck and slurp until he slaps a hand down against the table above me, the plates and silverware rattling atop the wooden surface. He curses as he punches his hips up, hot ropes of cum spurting from his throbbing cock. He holds my head down over his lap, emptying himself down my throat. It's hot and thick, salty and bitter. I'm simultaneously victorious and repulsed.

As soon as he finishes, he yanks me off by my hair, bringing his other hand up to pinch my cheeks together.

"Swallow."

My throat bobs in compliance and he loosens his grip, stroking my hair back.

"Good girl."

I melt, my muscles slackening and a whoosh of air leaving my lungs. The ghost of a smile tugs at Roman's lips as he clocks my reaction, gazing down at me in twisted satisfaction.

My legs are a little wobbly when he helps me to my feet. It feels like my body's on fire, needy and wanting and unfulfilled. I shiver as his fingers trail up my inner thigh, getting close to the apex, but not nearly close enough.

"I'm tempted to reward you, but that'd undermine the lesson, wouldn't it?" he muses, curling his hand in to brush his knuckles against my clit. A tiny whimper of need escapes my throat and my cheeks flush with shame, his lips curling back from his teeth in a feral grin. I'm still in a daze as he shifts me to the side of his chair and directs me to my own seat, swatting my ass with an open palm.

“Sit and eat,” he commands.

I step over and drop down into the chair, staring numbly at the food on the plate when he places it in front of me. Chicken and vegetables. I was hungry before, but food is the last thing on my mind now. The ache between my thighs is unrelenting and my head feels like it could float away.

“Unless you’d like this to be your lunchtime routine from now on, you’ll allow Dr. Hargrove to complete his examination,” Roman says blandly, picking up his silverware and cutting into the meat on his plate. He stabs a piece with his fork, pausing to glance over at me as he brings it to his lips. “Or don’t. I have no problem feeding you my cock at every meal.”

I stare back at him dumbfoundedly, lost for words. I shouldn’t be surprised that this was merely a punishment for going against his demands. For a second, I almost forgot that I married a monster.

He pops the piece of chicken into his mouth, chewing and swallowing. “Eat,” he repeats, pointing the tip of his knife in my direction.

My cheeks burn as I pick up my own silverware, silently complying.

And when Dr. Hargrove returns the next morning, I undress from the waist down, spread my legs, and allow him to take the swab.

13

The shadow visits me again a few nights later. I wake up to the distinct feeling of being watched, but the chair is still firmly in place against the door, no sign of any living person having entered my room. I think the manor must be haunted. That's the only explanation for the heavy feeling of eyes on me in the middle of the night and the subtle disturbance of something shifting in the darkness across the room.

Again, I bury myself beneath the covers, regulating my breathing and trying to force myself to calm down.

Nothing's there.

This isn't real.

I breathe in and out, in and out. Then a creak of the floorboards sends my heart racing again and I start all over, focusing on my breaths and slowly relaxing into the mattress.

After what feels like an eternity, I finally gather up the courage to chance another peek, but the shadow's gone.

When Clara arrives with my breakfast in the morning, I hand her a slip of paper containing my list as I take my seat. I wrote it out last night, trying to keep it short to increase the odds of all the items on it being fulfilled.

My phone.

My laptop.

My vintage Givenchy bag.

“What’s this?” Clara asks as she takes it from me hesitantly, eyes dropping to read the words scrawled on the paper.

“Roman said to put together a list of things I need from home,” I reply, reaching for my coffee cup as I amend, “from my father’s house.”

She nods slowly, tucking it into the pocket of her dress. “I’ll be sure to get it to him.”

“Thanks,” I say as I raise the cup to my lips, not hesitating to take a sip. I have no idea how the coffee around here is always the perfect temperature, but I’m appreciative that at least something about this hostage situation is playing out in my favor.

Since that horrible lunch I spent on my knees, I’ve mostly managed to avoid my husband, save for our nightly meals in the dining room. Each night, I’ve dressed to the nines and played my part while bracing myself for his worst, but he’s either been preoccupied with business matters or he’s finally grown bored of this cat and mouse game. I doubt I’m lucky enough for it to be the latter, but a girl can dream. And either way, I much prefer dining in relative silence to the alternative.

Clara goes about setting out my clothes and tidying the room as I sip my coffee, picking at a piece of toast and spreading scrambled eggs around my plate until it looks like I’ve made an effort to eat something. Then I take the little white bag of dog biscuits off the tray and stash it in the pocket of my cardigan before taking a shower and getting dressed to go outside. As sad as it is, the dogs are my only friends around here. Bringing them their morning treat is the highlight of my day.

As soon as I step out the front door of the manor and whistle for them, Nox and Vesper come trotting around the side of the house, wagging their stubby little tails. They've adapted to our routine, too. I drop to my knees and ruffle their fur, the pair of them licking my face as my eyes well up with tears and an unexpected sob tears from my throat.

I need these gentle, affectionate touches far too much. Despite my continued exploration of the manor and grounds, I haven't made any progress in my escape plans, and a bitter sense of hopelessness is beginning to take root deep in my soul. I hate this place. I hate my husband. I want to go home, but truthfully, I hated it there, too. I have nothing and nobody in this world, and the loneliness of it all is starting to swallow me up.

"Good boys," I praise as I turn my face into the side of Nox's thick neck, muffling another sob. "Such beautiful, sweet babies."

I allow myself to wallow for a few more seconds, then shove all that overwhelming despair to the back of my mind, locking it in a box and throwing away the fucking key. I can't give up. I've only been here a week, and what's that in the grand scheme of things? I will escape, and someday, this place and the people in it will all just be a distant memory.

If only I could take my good boys with me when I go.

"I know what you want," I sniffle as I rock back on my heels, digging a hand into the pocket of my sweater. The dogs' tails wag harder when I brandish the little paper bag, feeding each of them two of the four treats inside. Then I rise to my feet, brushing the crumbs off my hands as I watch them lick their chops. "Fun's all over, fellas," I say apologetically, giving each animal one more pat. "Wanna explore with me today?"

They pant and wag their tails, which I take as a yes.

“C’mon,” I laugh, waving for them to follow as I make my way across the lawn toward the towering hedges on the west side of the property.

I’ve attempted exploring the hedge maze for the past two days, but the thing is... well, a maze . It’s disorienting being surrounded by walls of greenery twice my height with endless twists and turns. It’d probably be a whole lot smarter to figure out how to get back into that tower and study the maze from above, but after what happened up there last time, I’m not in any rush to get caught trying to break in. So here I go, bound to get lost in the shrubbery for the next several hours.

At least I’ve got the dogs for company. They stick close to my side as I enter the maze and begin walking the paths, and though it occurs to me that with as relaxed as they are, they probably know the way out, neither of them respond when I ask them to show me the way. I make a fool out of myself by clapping my hands against my knees and using an embarrassing baby voice while urging them to lead me there, but they just tilt their heads and whine. Vesper even yawns and lays down, like he’s over my hysterics. As soon as I start walking again, though, he sure as shit gets up and starts following.

I try to memorize each turn I make, keeping track in my mind with a chorus of right, left, right’s , but as soon as my thoughts start to drift, I forget the sequence. And then I just wind up wandering aimlessly until I manage to find my way back to the start, stomping my feet on the ground like a petulant child and cursing under my breath. I pivot back around, considering taking another stab at it, but then my stomach grumbles and I end up just going back inside the manor for my regular lunch in the parlor.

After picking at my salad for an hour, I give up on eating, feeling listless as I start wandering the halls. I’ve now familiarized myself with all the rooms that have unlocked doors, so I try the ones that were previously locked just in case anything’s changed. It hasn’t, and I soon get bored of drifting around and head for the study.

Maybe I'll let the dogs in and curl up to read a book or something. Vesper makes a great pillow, and Nox's excited little tail wags always brighten my mood.

As I cross the threshold of the study, my steps falter, breath hitching. Because I figured Roman was out today, but I was wrong— he's here , resting upon one of the overstuffed sofas while scrolling on his phone.

I briefly consider just turning back around and leaving so I don't have to deal with him. Then I remember that this is my home now, too, and if my presence makes him uncomfortable, then he's free to leave. He's not the one trapped here against his will.

Roman glances up when he hears the scuff of my footsteps against the floor, eyes flickering back down to his phone screen a half a second later. He doesn't pay me any mind as I strut past him and start thumbing through the books on the shelves, passing up the classic literature in search of something more useful to my current agenda.

For a minute I forget he's even in the room, until the abrupt sound of his thundering voice makes me jump.

"Are you looking for something in particular?" Roman asks, not bothering to look up from his phone as he speaks.

I give him the same treatment, continuing my perusal of the titles on the shelves while keeping the boogeyman in my peripheral vision. "I'm looking for books about psychology."

He lifts his head, quirking a brow in my direction.

"I've always been interested in human behavior," I mumble, running my fingers along the dusty spines. "Split personalities, things like that."

“Most of the educational texts are in the library,” Roman replies flatly. “But if you want fiction, I’d suggest Jekyll and Hyde.”

I turn to look at him over my shoulder curiously, meeting his impassive stare.

“Second shelf from the left, third one up,” he murmurs before dropping his gaze back to his phone.

I let out the breath I didn’t realize I was holding, pacing over to the shelf he indicated and fingering the spines as I read the titles. I locate Jekyll and Hyde easily enough, snatching the book up, turning around, and clutching it to my chest as I stride past him toward the door. I’ll find somewhere else to read for the afternoon, far away from Mister Volkov .

“Your test results came back clean,” he comments absently, his voice a dull monotone.

I stop in my tracks, arching a brow. “Oh?” My heart pounds faster and my palms turn clammy. “So, what, now you get to have your way with me?” I grit out, suddenly wishing the one guy I slept with wasn’t a squeaky-clean virgin like myself. I’d gladly take some minor, easily curable STD over the news that my monstrous husband just got the ‘all clear’ to fuck me.

He makes a scoffing sound in his throat, his emerald gaze flickering up to meet mine. “I’ll do whatever I like with you, wife .”

I flinch back, clutching the book tighter to my chest as my brows pinch together in frustration. “And what, I just don’t get a say?”

“I thought that was understood?”

I grind my molars, bile crawling up my throat. Who the hell does this man think he is?

My husband. That's who he is, and he's also a man who's accustomed to getting what he wants, which means I'm royally screwed. Or I will be, whenever he sees fit. Right now, there's no wild lust in his eyes; no feral hunger for my flesh. He's looking at me as if I'm just another piece of furniture.

"You can go," he grumbles dismissively, turning his attention back to his phone.

He doesn't need to tell me twice. I pivot toward the doors and hightail it out of the study, mentally cursing a god I no longer believe in for the nightmare my life has become.

14

My eyes pore over the aged pages of Jekyll and Hyde as I pick at my salad the following afternoon, barely able to absorb the story while my thoughts continually drift to my escape scheme.

The hedge maze is a bust. I get so turned around in there that I can't tell my ass from my elbow, always winding up right back where I started. Not to mention the fact that even if I were able to figure it out, I still don't know whether a path to freedom lies on the other side. It could just be a waste of time; a pointless distraction.

I know from our trips to and from the estate that we're miles from civilization. The forest around the manor is thick, and it's getting colder at night as winter approaches. Simply trying to make a run for it would be suicide— I wouldn't last a single night out in those woods alone.

No, the only sure way to rid myself of Roman for good is by getting close to him, first. I need to find out what makes him tick; unearth the skeletons lurking within the manor's many closets. If he thinks I've accepted my role as his docile, obedient wife, maybe he'll let his guard down and give me something that's worth bartering for my freedom over. Which also means it's time for me to strap in and brace myself for what's to come.

Getting close to Roman means playing the long game, and I'll need to toughen up if I have any prayer of surviving it. Of surviving him .

"Are you all finished, ma'am?" Clara asks, startling me from my tangled web of

thoughts. I jerk my head up to find her hovering in the doorway of the parlor, eyeing my barely-touched plate with judgment. “Was there something wrong with the salad?”

“No, it was delicious,” I insist, flipping my book closed and pushing up from the chair. “I’m just not very hungry today, that’s all.”

“But Mr. Volkov...”

“Doesn’t need to know,” I finish for her, frowning.

She stares at me for a long moment, then finally concedes with a curt nod, her Mary Jane’s clacking against the marble as she comes over to collect my plate.

I tuck the book under my arm, breezing past Clara to head for the study. Maybe a change of scenery will allow me to get lost in the story rather than daydreaming about escaping this hellhole.

It’s overcast outside today, and the dreary weather makes the hallways of the manor even more dim and ominous looking as I navigate through them toward the back of the house. It’s always so quiet in here; so devoid of life. A shiver creeps up my spine as a feeling comes over me that I’m being watched, the little hairs on the back of my neck standing on end in warning. I look back and forth to verify that the corridor is indeed vacant, yet I still can’t shake that prickly feeling.

I swear this place is haunted.

My heart pounds as I pick up my pace, turning a corner sharply only to discover that I’m not alone after all. It isn’t a ghoul or an apparition coming toward me from the opposite end of the hall, though— it’s a very real, very handsome man.

I've never seen him before, but he's almost as tall and imposing as Roman, and just as impressively built. The fabric of his well-tailored black suit clings to his broad chest, straining over his thick shoulders and biceps. A tattoo peeks from underneath his shirt collar, inky swirls crawling up the side of his neck and brushing just below his left ear, where his blonde hair is shaved short on the sides and worn longer on top. He's undeniably attractive, but I know all too well that the devil bestows the most striking beauty upon his most sinister soldiers.

I stop in my tracks, unease washing over me when our eyes lock. I've never found a stranger wandering the halls of the manor before, so the sight of him has me immediately on guard.

"Who are you?" I blurt, eyeing him suspiciously.

He cards his fingers through his silky-looking hair as he continues his approach, coming to a halt in front of me and extending his other hand with a roguish grin. "Niko Petrov."

I tuck my book tighter underneath my arm as I hesitantly place my hand in his, the puzzle pieces slotting together in my brain as I recall Roman mentioning someone by that name.

"You must be the new Mrs. Volkov," he drawls, giving me a firm handshake before taking a respectful step backwards and pocketing his hands in his slacks. "I'm your husband's second."

"You're in real estate, too?" I question with an innocent tilt of my head.

A smirk curls his lips. "Something like that."

I nod slowly, accepting his vague response— because even though I'm currently

batting my lashes at Niko like a bashful little housewife, I'm actually not a complete idiot. I'm well aware of what these guys are into. Not the specifics, of course, since the women in this world are never brought in on the actual business side of things, but it all falls under the umbrella of organized crime. It's the reason I was traded to Roman in the first place. I'm just a pawn in some business deal; a lamb for the slaughter.

"So, how are you settling in?" Niko asks in an attempt to make idle conversation.

I continue eyeing him uncertainly as I reply, "Fine."

A smile comes to his lips, his blue eyes harboring a kindness that feels jarringly out in place within the foreboding atmosphere of the manor. "This old place takes some getting used to, huh?" he remarks, glancing around. "It used to freak me out when I was a kid, I thought it was haunted."

My brows shoot up. "You've been coming here that long?"

Niko nods, chuckling softly. "Only my whole life. I grew up with the Volkovs." He gestures to the book tucked under my arm. "Reading anything good?"

A blush heats my cheeks as I reach for the novel, slipping it from beneath my arm and showing him the cover. "Jekyll and Hyde."

"Ah," he muses, nodding. "A classic. The twist at the end is really something, I'd give anything to read it again for the first time."

"I'm not even halfway through yet," I admit, glancing down at the cover.

"Well, you're in for a treat," he remarks.

I flicker my gaze back up to meet his, lips curving in a smile. “Guess that gives me something to look forward to, then.”

Something about Niko puts me at ease. He’s not as harsh or intimidating as Roman. I almost forgot what it’s like to just carry a normal conversation.

“So, what’s your connection to the family?” I ask casually, recognizing the opportunity to pry for information. “You said you grew up with Roman?”

“Yeah,” he chuckles. “My old man was...”

“You’re not spilling secrets, are you Niko?” Roman’s booming voice interrupts, my blood turning to ice in my veins.

My posture goes rigid as I hear his oxfords clipping against the marble floor behind me, his footsteps drawing closer.

Niko snaps his head up, blanching a little before quickly recovering his composure and running a casual hand through his hair. “Just getting to know your new wife,” he replies, an easy grin settling across his face.

Roman comes to a stop beside me, and I fight back a flinch when he sets a possessive hand on my shoulder. “Eliza, why don’t you go wait for me in the study?” he suggests, prompting me to look up and meet those sinister green eyes. “I’ll join you in a minute.”

My stomach bottoms out. I know that look, and my fight or flight instincts are already kicking in as I nod numbly in agreement, Niko sidestepping to allow me to pass.

“Nice meeting you, Eliza,” he winks.

“You too,” I breathe, clutching my book to my chest and averting my gaze as I hurry past him down the hall.

I don’t go to the study.

From the unhinged gleam in Roman’s eyes, I know it’s a trap, and I’d be a fool to willingly walk into it. I stride right past the open French doors, deviating to the adjacent corridor in search of a place to hide. Probably not the smartest strategy, but I’ve never been great at thinking on my feet.

When I spot the massive doors for the old ballroom, I decide it’s my best bet. It’s one of the many forgotten rooms in the manor, so it probably wouldn’t even occur to Roman to look inside. I grasp for the cold knob of one of the heavy wooden doors, pulling it open, ducking in, and closing it quietly behind me.

My heart pounds as I sag back against the door, pressing a palm to my chest in an effort to calm the erratic beat. The minutes seem to stretch on for an eternity as I stand there with my back pressed to the wood, until finally, my pulse slows, my breathing returning to normal.

Then I hear footsteps out in the hall.

My pulse takes off at a gallop, my breath stalling in my lungs as I listen to the familiar clip of Roman’s shoes against the floor outside the door. The sound draws closer, and I don’t move a muscle, holding my breath until it sounds like he’s right on the opposite side.

The knob doesn’t turn. The door doesn’t open. He doesn’t even pause— just continues on down the corridor, the sound of his footsteps receding into the distance. Only when I can barely hear them anymore do I finally dare to exhale, hugging my book tightly to my chest as I suck in greedy gulps of oxygen.

Shit, that was close.

After calming myself down, I wait a good ten minutes while listening to the continued silence in the hallway before making a move. My hand trembles as I turn and reach for the brass doorknob, twisting it in my grip and slipping out of the ballroom into the vacant corridor. Remaining alert, I tiptoe toward the front of the house. There's no sign of my husband, but that doesn't mean he's given up his hunt. I just have to be careful not to get ensnared by him before I can make it upstairs to the sanctuary of my bedroom.

The grandfather clock chimes to announce the time, startling me into picking up my pace. I'm almost to the stairs when I round a corner and a hand suddenly darts out to grip me by the throat, slamming me up against the wall. My book clatters to the floor as I stare back at Roman wide-eyed, fear suffocating my lungs.

"Playing games now, pet?" he murmurs, his palm tightening against my windpipe as he crowds in closer, his massive build caging me against the wall.

My hands instinctively fly up to claw at his grip on my throat, my lungs burning with the need for oxygen. "Let me go," I choke out.

"Now why would I do that when I just caught you?" he mocks, a savage grin stretching his lips. "I didn't know you like games." He leans in, running his nose along my jawline and inhaling deeply. "I could fuck you right here, you know. Hard and fast, up against the wall..."

What little breath I have left catches, a traitorous pulse thrumming between my thighs in response to his threat. His grin widens, almost as if he's picked up on it.

"Would you like that, Eliza?" he drawls, alleviating some of the pressure restricting my air so I can respond. He doesn't let go entirely— his hand still circles my throat

possessively, the other shifting up to grip my hip and pull the lower half of my body flush against his.

“No,” I rasp, even though I’m aware it’s not the answer he’s seeking. Even though part of me wants to say yes and just get this over with.

“You sure?” he questions, cocking his head slightly as his palm slides up the curve of my waist. “I could make it good for you.” His hand roams higher and he thumbs my nipple. “Providing you behave yourself, of course.”

The needy throb between my legs intensifies, labored breaths sawing from my lungs and my nipples hardening into stiff points. Roman pinches one between his fingers, a smirk curling his lips when a little whine escapes my own.

“Is it so hard to admit what you really want?” he taunts, shoving a knee between my thighs. The friction against my center sends a shockwave through my body, my head falling back and smacking against the wall.

I stare into Roman’s eyes breathlessly, tongue-tied and trapped in the unwavering intensity of his gaze. I couldn’t reply even if I wanted to, but my lack of response doesn’t seem to deter him. He shifts his hand from my throat, winding a strand of my blonde hair around his finger. “Such a pretty little pet,” he murmurs thoughtfully, wetting his lips with his tongue. “I can’t wait to hear you purr for your master when I’m deep inside you.” I gasp as he yanks the strand sharply, little pinpricks of pain breaking out over my scalp. “Or scream. I’ll bet you scream beautifully, don’t you, darling?”

It's like I'm having an out of body experience, knowing I shouldn't want this monster anywhere near me, yet inexplicably craving his touch. His filthy words set off a fission of heat in my core, spreading through my veins like wildfire as he adjusts his knee between my thighs. The friction is glorious, and I'm far too tempted to grind

down and chase more of it.

“Mr. Volkov?” Clara’s voice rings out from the back of the house.

Roman darts an annoyed glance in the direction of the sound, and the moment our eye contact breaks, I’m plunged back into reality.

This is wrong. I don’t want it.

His eyes return to mine, and I gaze into them pleadingly. “Please just let me go,” I whisper.

My husband smirks as he releases his hold on me, rocking back a step and straightening his shirt cuffs nonchalantly. “To be continued,” he remarks, abruptly turning on a heel and walking away, leaving me panting against the wall in a daze.

It takes a few seconds to get my wits about me again. Once I’m able to compose myself, I push off from the wall, scoop my book up off the floor, and make a mad dash for the foyer, racing up the stairs.

It isn’t until I’m safely inside my bedroom that some of the tension finally drains from my muscles, though that fluttery, desperate feeling still lingers in my core. Heading straight for the en-suite bathroom, I strip out of my clothes and turn on the shower. My skin feels like it’s burning everywhere that Roman touched me, so I set the temperature to cold.

The frigid water shocks my system the moment I step beneath the spray. I suck in a sharp gasp, curling in on myself, but even as the cold saturates my skin, that hot, needy pulse is still throbbing between my thighs. It’s so relentless that I slip a hand between them to alleviate the ache, gently stroking the fire to life as my fingers find my clit.

The encounter with Roman in the corridor replays in my mind as my fingers dance—the weight of his body against mine; the danger in his eyes as he pinned me against the wall. My fingers move faster while the words he spoke echo in my ears like a soundtrack to my own demise.

‘I could fuck you right here, you know.’

My thighs tremble as the coil in my belly winds tighter.

‘Would you like that, Eliza?’

A low moan tumbles from my lips, unbidden.

‘I’ll bet you scream beautifully, don’t you darling?’

A rush of euphoria surges through my body as I tumble over the edge of bliss, free-falling into a powerful, body-shaking orgasm. I continue rubbing circles around my clit as I ride it out, falling back against the tiled wall and panting raggedly as the icy water sluices over my skin.

The moment I come back down to earth, shame and disgust take hold as I realize there must be something seriously wrong with me.

Because I just got off on the thought of my tormentor.

And somehow, I already know it won’t be the last time I do.

15

Three of the past five nights, I've felt the shadow in my room. It lingers in the darkness, watching me silently as I bury myself underneath the covers and will it to leave.

This place is definitely haunted.

It'd be foolish to fear some imaginary evil when there's a very real one lurking in the east wing, though. So, each time I wake up to the spine-prickling feeling of being watched, I force myself to remain calm, knowing it'll pass soon. And when it finally does, I fall asleep to fantasies of escaping this place and being free for once in my godforsaken life.

Since that tense interaction in the hall, Roman and I have been passing like two ships in the night— but I should've known it'd be too good to be true for things to continue that way for long. At breakfast, Clara tells me that I'll be having lunch with Mister Volkov in the dining room, and my stomach sinks like a stone. Because the last time we had lunch together, he shoved his cock down my throat, and I'm terrified to think of what fresh hell awaits me this time.

There's also something else that sparked within me when Clara informed me of my lunch plans. Something I refuse to acknowledge, because doing so would mean that I'm just as fucked in the head as my new husband is. A little rush of titillation; a surge of excitement.

I'm ashamed to admit I've continued touching myself to the thought of his rough

handling in the hallway.

Is this when he finally delivers on those promises he made?

As soon as I step into the dining room and see that feral, unhinged look in his eyes, my suspicions are all but confirmed. The ghost of a smile crosses his lips as I step through the doorway and he pats his thigh, beckoning me with a flick of his head.

I suck in a deep breath, steeling my nerves as begin my march to certain doom.

The soft fabric of my red cashmere dress swishes around my upper thighs as I cross the room, and I don't miss the hunger in Roman's gaze as his eyes drop to tour my bare legs, growing in intensity as they rake their way up my form. Every instinct within me is screaming to turn and run, but I continue forward, resigning myself to whatever twisted game he's about to play with me. For all I know, fleeing from my husband would only excite him. When he's in one of his moods, he's a predator and I'm the prey.

I think some part of me likes this game.

I come to a stop beside his chair, my heart beating a riot in my chest and my steps faltering. Then I remind myself of the role I'm supposed to be playing; my end goal of freeing myself from this prison. I begrudgingly move in closer and ease down onto his lap.

Roman immediately readjusts my position to his liking, his hand landing on my thigh and this thumb stroking my bare flesh. "I've missed you, pet," he croons, nudging the hem of my dress up my thigh with each sweep of his thumb.

This is definitely feeling like some fucked-up Jekyll and Hyde situation. I'm not sure if I'm just building something up in my mind after poring over the pages of that book

for the past couple days, but I swear Roman becomes an entirely different person like the flip of a switch. One minute, he's cold and aloof, and the next, he's this ; manic and unhinged.

Mister Hyde.

His hand moves from my thigh up the curve of my waist, and I find myself melting into his touch— chasing it, even. He cruises his palm up the swell of my breast, a flood of heat rushing to my core. As he trails the backs of his knuckles up the side of my throat, that desperate throb starts up between my thighs. While I shouldn't want to be anywhere near this man, I'm so starved for touch that even the caress of the devil is too tempting to resist.

Roman slides his hand up to cup my cheek in his calloused palm, sweeping his thumb back and forth across my lower lip. "I just keep thinking about this mouth of yours," he murmurs, the deep tone of his voice dripping with sin.

I press my thighs together tighter in a surge of rebellion. "Go fuck yourself," I breathe.

He chuckles under his breath, green eyes glimmering with amusement. "Now why would I do that when I can fuck you ?"

I stare back at him defiantly, back ramrod straight and chin held high. Then four little words leave my lips almost on their own accord, sealing my damnation. "Just do it, then."

Maybe I just want to get it over with so the dark cloud of apprehension will stop hanging over my head. Maybe some twisted part of me actually wants it, and that's why I put on this dress and showed up here without complaint. Whatever it is, it doesn't matter— because fucking my husband is an inevitability, and those four words

are all it takes for him to spring into action.

Roman's eyes light up with deviant excitement as he effortlessly lifts me from his lap, dropping me down onto the table in front of him and rucking my dress up to my waist. His fingers curl into the waistband of my red lace panties and he yanks them down my legs in one smooth motion, balling them in a fist and bringing them up in front of my face.

"Open," he commands, and I do. Not because I'm some bitch he's brought to heel, but because if I'm gagged, it's a guarantee that he won't try to kiss me.

Kissing is too intimate.

Kissing leads to feelings, and this is purely transactional.

As soon as he shoves my panties in my mouth, Roman grabs me by my inner thighs, forcing them apart and rocking back on his heels to admire his prize.

"Fuck," he growls, sliding a hand to the apex and spreading me wide with his fingers. "Look how pretty this pussy is."

I assume he's just babbling to himself, but then he abruptly leans forward and slips a hand around the back of my neck, fingers tightening around my nape to angle my head down and force me to look. "I think it'll look even better stuffed with my cock, don't you?"

I whine behind the fabric in my mouth and his hand slips away to drop to his belt, fingers working to unfasten the buckle. His slacks fall to the floor, his massive erection springing free between his powerfully muscled thighs.

Another flood of heat builds in my core at the sight of him as he takes it in his fist,

stepping forward to rub the velvety crown through my folds and bumping it against my clit. My body shudders, blood turning molten in my veins.

“Oh Eliza, I’ve waited so long for this,” he murmurs, wrapping a hand around my thigh. “You have no idea how much restraint I’ve exercised. But now...” He lines his tip up with my entrance, fingers tightening their grip around my thigh. “Now you’re truly mine.”

With a forceful yank, he pulls me to the edge of the table, impaling me on his thick cock. I scream into my gag, tears springing to my eyes as I fall back against the surface, my head smacking against the wood painfully. A low groan rattles from Roman’s throat as he pauses for a moment while fully seated inside me. I’m not sure if he’s just taking a second to enjoy the sensation or allowing me to adjust, but the pain ebbs slightly before he slowly drags out halfway, pushing back in smoothly.

“Fuck,” he grits out, his pelvis smacking against my inner thighs. “This was definitely worth the wait.”

Pain splinters between my legs as my inner walls stretch to accommodate his girth, quickly giving way to pleasure with each pulse of his hips. If I’m being honest, it’s not like I was completely unprepared. I can taste the tang of my arousal on the fabric in my mouth, and each glide of his cock inside me is a shameful reminder of how wet I am. Though I try to stifle my whimpers, they slip free, each little noise I make spurring him on.

Roman suddenly leans forward over my body, grabbing me roughly by the nape and hauling me upright. Once again, he forces me to look down between my legs, at where our bodies are now joined. “I was right, wasn’t I?” he taunts, chuckling darkly as he presses his forehead against mine. “Look how your greedy pussy is swallowing my cock, pet. Look how well you take me.”

Shit, I swear his praise makes me even wetter, the coil in my belly winding tight as he continues rutting into me. Tears stream down my cheeks, but at this point I'm not sure if they're from pain or pleasure; fear or desire. He's right, they're two sides of the same coin, and right now I'm all mixed up, the signals in my brain misfiring.

Especially when he grips onto my thighs and lifts me from the table, falling back into his chair and taking me with him. I land on his lap with his cock still inside me and he directs my hips, slamming me down over him as he grunts his pleasure. I'm not sure when I actually start riding him in earnest, but before I know it, I'm moaning into my gag, rolling my hips and chasing the glorious friction of his pubic bone against my clit.

This is nothing like that clumsy romp with Wesley that was over in two minutes flat. No, this is like a goddamn out of body experience, my toes curling and thighs clenching as I bounce up and down on Roman's lap, wound up tighter than a damn bowstring. As if he can sense I'm close to detonation, one of his hands leaves my hips, curving in so he can rub the pad of his thumb against my throbbing clit.

My muscles tense beneath his ministrations as his fingers work me expertly and he buries his face in the crook of my neck. Then suddenly, his teeth sink into my flesh and he bites down hard, the shot of pain tipping me over the edge. Fireworks explode behind my eyelids as I freefall into oblivion, the panties in my mouth barely containing my muffled screams of ecstasy as I come undone.

"That's right, pet," Roman growls in satisfaction, fingertips digging into the soft flesh of my hip as my body shudders and convulses with my climax. "Come all over my cock. Show me how much you like it."

I hate it.

I love it.

I have no idea who or what I am anymore, just that I come so hard I see stars, gripping his thick shoulders and holding on for dear life as I ride it out.

I fight to catch my breath as I come back down, spitting out the gag so I can drag some much-needed oxygen into my lungs. When I meet Roman's eyes, he's got a savage grin on his face, punching up his hips to bury himself deeper inside me. He murmurs something under his breath that I can't make out over the sound of my own pulse hammering in my ears, then abruptly pulls me off his cock, lifting me from his lap and tossing me back onto the table.

He rises to his feet, fisting his length with a guttural groan as he shoves my dress up with his other hand. Ropes of cum shoot from his tip, landing on my belly in warm, sticky ropes of possession. My brain is still fuzzy, mind going blank— and I have no idea what comes over me, but I reach down to touch it, dragging my fingertips through his mess before lifting them to my lips.

Call it strategy. Call it madness. Call it whatever you want to, but the reaction the move elicits isn't one I'll soon forget.

Roman's chest heaves as he stares down at me reverently, watching as I dart my tongue out to lick his cum from my fingers, his emerald eyes turning molten. He reaches for me with a feral growl, smearing the rest of it into the skin of my belly with his thumbs like a mark of ownership, then reaches up to put one of them to my mouth in offering. Almost as if on instinct, I wrap my lips around his digit and suck it inside.

He groans again in twisted satisfaction, my lips releasing his thumb with a pop as he retracts his hand and gently tugs my dress back down over my thighs.

“I want you in red tonight.”

A nother week has passed since I became Mrs. Volkov, and I've fallen into some semblance of a daily routine here at the haunted mansion. My new husband and I barely speak to one another. We only see each other at dinner, where I dress up for him each night in red or black, depending on Clara's instructions for the evening. I've learned that he likes me in red when he's having a mood swing. Those are the nights he fucks me. When I wear black, he's back to being cold and aloof, and he hardly even looks my way as I blend into the background of the manor.

The shadow in my room at night continues to haunt me. I often wake from a dead sleep to the overwhelming sensation of being watched, burrowing beneath the covers until the feeling eventually passes and I fall back into a restless slumber. I've built up a story in my mind to explain it– that the former Mrs. Volkov must've met some untimely demise, and her restless soul is still trapped here, wondering why I'm sleeping in her bed.

Am I destined to meet the same fate and become one of the manor's many ghosts?

That's the macabre thought keeping me from falling into a state of complacency as I go about the same routine, day after day. I wake up to Clara delivering breakfast and daydream about escaping as I sip my coffee. I feed the dogs biscuits and conjure up plans to gain my freedom while walking the grounds with them trotting happily alongside me. Sometimes I stop by the garden shed to chat with Lev, hoping he'll slip up and give me some nugget of information to use against my husband, while others, I just aimlessly wander the estate, committing every detail of the layout to memory.

Fourteen steps from the front door to the driveway. Sixty-four steps from the southwest corner of the manor to the hedges. Seventy-six steps from the back door off the study to the dog kennels.

I've given up on the hedge maze for now, but I did finally work up the courage to explore the family cemetery plot beside it a few days ago. The crumbling, decrepit gravestones and eerie mausoleum are straight out of a horror movie, so I didn't stick around long. It's not as if the dead can offer anything to aid in my getaway— they're just as trapped here as I am.

Despite Roman's warning to keep out, I've been checking the door to the tower every time he leaves the house. Still locked. A handful of the other doors in the manor have remained locked, too, but that doesn't mean I don't test the handles each time I pass by. I've heard that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result, and if that's true, then maybe I'm slowly going insane.

In a quiet lagoon, devils dwell. That's what my grandfather used to say, and the silence around the manor lately makes me uneasy. I'm constantly on guard, living in a perpetual state of fight or flight. Tonight, I'm so jumpy that even the crackle of the fire burning in the study's hearth has been making me flinch. Clara lit it with the promise that it'd put off enough heat to chase away the autumn chill, but nothing can alleviate the cold sense of foreboding that's settled in my bones ever since Roman failed to appear in the dining room for our nightly meal. According to Clara, he's just working late, but the break in routine has me feeling even more on edge than usual.

In an effort to distract my restless mind, I'm once again buried in the brittle pages of *Jekyll and Hyde*, cocooned beneath a cashmere throw blanket while curled atop one of the sofas beside of the fire. I've just gotten to the big reveal in the novel— that Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are one and the same— and though I know it's a work of fiction, I can't help but draw parallels between the book's characters and the man I've been

living with. Much like Jekyll and Hyde, my husband seems to have a split personality. But unlike the story, I somehow doubt Roman will off himself to spare the world his dark side.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the familiar thud of his approaching footsteps sounds from the hall, rousing Nox and Vesper from the nap they've been taking in front of the fire. They perk up and look toward the open doorway of the study while I cast my own nervous glance in the same direction, breath catching when Roman steps through and our gazes collide.

He looks more exhausted than I've ever seen him. Dark circles rim his eyes, and his typically well-groomed hair is in a state of dishevelment, like he's been running his hands through it nonstop. As my eyes drop to take in his appearance, I notice his designer suit is rumpled and the crisp white dress shirt underneath is splattered with crimson, telling of what sort of 'business' kept him out so late.

For most women, seeing their husband arrive home with bloodstains on his clothes would be cause for alarm. I grew up in this world, though, and this is far from the first time I've seen someone enter a room wearing the blood of their enemies.

"Rough day at the office?" I ask, arching a brow as my gaze lifts to meet his again.

"You could say that," he murmurs in response, stepping over to the bar cart. Glass clinks as he goes about pouring himself a drink, and I take that as my cue to leave, tossing the blanket off my body and sliding my bare feet down to the floor.

Right as I'm pushing up to stand, Roman speaks again.

"Have a drink with me."

It's spoken in such an even tone that I'm not sure whether it's a question or a

command. I've become somewhat adept at navigating Roman's mood swings, and I've been adjusting my own behavior accordingly to suit whichever version of him I'm dealing with. Right now, I can't get a good read on him, though. I'm not sure which monster I'm facing or how carefully I need to tread.

I'm still perched on the edge of the couch, frozen in indecision when he turns back around with a crystal tumbler in each hand, evidently deciding on my behalf. Eating up the distance between us in long strides, he thrusts one toward me in offering.

I reach out to take it, observing how Roman's gaze lingers on the purple bruising decorating my right wrist. He always seems strangely unsettled when he sees the bruises he's left on my skin, like he's caught off guard by his own strength. They didn't hurt when he inflicted them, though. As he was pinning my wrists to the wall above my head, pounding between my thighs, all I knew was soul-sucking, mind-numbing pleasure. The kind that I have no right feeling with a man I despise.

I've decided that my penchant for pain must be some sort of trauma response to the abuse I've endured in the past. My father liked to smack me around, and somewhere along the line, my wires must've gotten crossed in my brain. I shouldn't enjoy feeling pain, but in the right context, some part of me does. I shouldn't get off on the thrill of it, but I do... and so does Roman .

We're a match made in hell.

Dropping onto the sofa across from me, he turns his gaze toward the fire, popping the top button on his collar with one hand and lifting his glass to his lips with the other. I raise my own drink, the pungent scent of vodka tickling my nose. I'm sure it's expensive, but I typically prefer my vodka chilled. Then again, I suppose it'll steel my nerves either way.

Right as I touch the rim of the glass to my lips, a muffled thump sounds overhead,

making me flinch. “Is Clara still here?” I ask tentatively, eyes darting up to the ceiling.

Roman takes another swallow of vodka before lowering his tumbler to rest on the arm of the couch. “She left when I arrived,” he replies curly. “It’s just the manor settling.”

“Seems to be a lot of that,” I mutter, taking a sip from my own glass to tamp down my anxiety. “I’m starting to think this place is haunted.”

The corner of his mouth lifts infinitesimally, his piercing green eyes meeting mine. “Do you believe in ghosts, Eliza?”

“I think so,” I quietly admit. “I never thought much of stuff like that before, but since moving in here...” I roll my lower lip between my teeth as I trail off, darting a nervous glance around the room.

“Well, this is a very old house,” he states cryptically.

My brows shoot up, eyes pinging back to meet his again. “Are you saying it is haunted?”

He shrugs a shoulder, trailing a fingertip along the rim of his glass. “In a sense. There’s a lot of history clinging to the walls of this place. And in a house this old, there’s bound to be creaks and groans, shadows...”

“There’s a shadow in my room,” I blurt.

Roman stares back at me, his jaw set tight.

My cheeks burn with embarrassment and I avert my eyes, immediately wishing I could force the words back down my throat now that I hear how crazy they sound.

“In a place like this, it’s easy to let your imagination run wild,” he muses, taking another sip from his glass. “Fear is a construct. If you don’t believe in it, then it can’t have any power over you.”

“Are you a figment of my imagination?” I scoff bitterly.

He narrows his eyes on me, arching a dark brow. “Are you saying you’re afraid of me?”

“Shouldn’t I be?”

He snorts a wry laugh, raising his tumbler to his lips and finishing off the vodka inside. He doesn’t say no. Pushing up from his seat, he crosses the room to return to the bar cart and pour himself another drink. My resentful stare burns into his back as the clink of glass fills the silence that’s settled between us.

“Are my things ever going to be delivered?” I ask, emboldened by the vodka coursing through my bloodstream. “I gave my list to Clara last week, but I’m still waiting.”

Roman slowly turns to face me, his brow furrowing slightly as if this is news to him. “I’ll have to speak with her about it,” he murmurs.

“You mean she didn’t give it to you?”

“Must’ve slipped her mind.”

I make a scoffing sound in my throat, shifting my weight on the sofa. As I move, my cardigan slips off my left shoulder, falling to my elbow. I instinctively tug it back up to conceal my scars, jaw clenching as I glance back up at Roman.

“You don’t have to cover it,” he mumbles, gaze still fixed on my arm as he leans

back against the bar cart and takes a swig of his fresh drink.

“I know,” I grit out. “I’m just used to covering up. My father didn’t like looking at it.” I drop my gaze to my lap, fingers tightening around my glass and eyes glazing over as the hazy memories of that day filter into my consciousness. The heat of the fire. My mother’s screams . “He’s not the one who’s had to live with it on his body, though,” I rasp. “He wasn’t in the car when it caught on fire and smashed into a telephone pole.”

“You mean it caught fire when it hit the pole,” Roman mumbles, correcting me.

I snap my attention back to him, a scowl twisting my lips in response to his patronizing tone.

I should’ve known better than to actually be vulnerable with him. Shame on me for thinking he possesses a shred of humanity.

“No, the fire was first,” I huff, irritation bubbling up inside me like a rising tempest. “Why do you think she swerved off the road?”

He narrows his eyes on me dubiously as he raises the tumbler to his mouth, finishing off the rest of the vodka inside with a single swallow. Licking the residue from his lips, he turns at the waist to set his glass back down on the bar cart with a soft clink.

“Have a good night,” Roman says in a clipped tone as he pivots toward the doorway, evidently finished with our conversation.

I glare after him angrily, grinding my molars. I should’ve known better than to attempt conversation with him in the first place.

17

“ I ’ll be back later, boys,” I coo, bending down give to Nox and Vesper each a parting scratch behind their ears.

They wag their tails happily, gazing up at me with their big pink tongues hanging out. They’re probably waiting for an invitation to come inside since it’s starting to drizzle, but Roman’s home today, which means I’m treading carefully. I’m not in the mood to argue with Mister Volkov , so they’ll have to retreat to the kennels if they want to stay dry.

Beaming one last smile in their direction, I pivot toward the front door of the manor, the chill in the air biting at my legs through my sheer black tights. I almost objected to the figure-hugging sweater dress Clara picked out for me to wear today, but when I saw the suede ankle boots she paired with it, I folded like a house of cards. I’m a sucker for a cute pair of boots.

Upon entering the manor, I find Clara loitering in the foyer, as if she’s been waiting for me to come back inside.

“Lunch in the parlor again today, Mrs. Volkov?” she asks, even though that’s where I always have it.

“Yes, thank you,” I reply, giving her a tight-lipped smile.

I’m finding it more difficult every day to fake niceties with the frigid housemaid. Not only is she complicit in keeping me captive here, but it’s obvious she doesn’t like me

very much. She's firmly on team Roman.

Clara nods politely, turning on a heel to head for the kitchen. "Your things are on your bed," she adds as she starts to walk away.

My heart skips a beat.

"Wait!" I call, prompting her to stop and swivel back around. "What things?"

"The things from your list," she replies curtly.

A spark of excitement ignites in my chest, my eyes widening in stunned surprise. When Roman told me the other night that he'd follow up with Clara about my list, I didn't expect him to actually come through. Part of me didn't believe him when he said he hadn't received it.

I let out an embarrassing squeal of delight as I spin around and rush toward the stairs, bounding up them to head for the west wing.

The door to my bedroom is standing ajar when I reach it, shoving inside and eagerly glancing around the interior. Spotting several boxes on my bed, I dart toward them with spring in my step, anxious to get my hands on a little piece of home. The closer I get, though, the more my elation starts to fizzle out—because the things on the bed aren't the ones from my list.

My lips turn down in a frown as I approach the edge, my stomach sinking like a stone. A brand new phone and laptop are resting atop the plush white duvet, still sealed in their boxes, and the shopping bag beside them contains a black leather Givenchy bag with the price tags still attached. Technically, it's what I asked for, but I distinctly remember writing the word 'my' before each item.

I spin back around with an annoyed grunt, leaving the gifts behind and stomping back out into the hall. My angry footsteps echo through the corridor as I make my way to the stairs, descending them and marching through the darkened hallways of the manor toward Roman's office. I'm still not in the mood to argue with my husband today, but that's exactly what's about to happen.

The door to his office is slightly ajar, and I kick a foot out to push it open with the toe of my adorable suede boot, rapping my knuckles against the wooden doorframe to announce my presence.

"What do you want?" Roman sighs, not even bothering to look up from the paperwork on his desk.

"The things on my list, for starters," I quip, advancing into the room with a purposeful stride.

He slowly lifts his head to meet my gaze as I come to a stop on the opposite side of his desk, his brow furrowing. "Did Clara not bring them up today?" he asks. "I specifically told her..."

"No, I found them," I huff.

"Then this is certainly a strange expression of gratitude."

I ball my hands into fists at my sides, my fingernails digging crescents into my palms. "I didn't want new things," I grit out, glaring daggers at him. "I wanted mine."

He blows out an annoyed breath, reclining back in his leather chair and folding his hands over his abs. "What's the difference?" he asks. "Don't tell me you had an emotional attachment to your electronics."

“The bag,” I clarify.

Roman arches a dark brow. “Did you want a different style?”

“No, I want my bag,” I snap. “It was...” I trail off, hesitant to show him any hint of vulnerability. It’s the only way I’ll get what I’m after, though, so I swallow thickly before grumbling, “It was my mom’s.”

“I see,” he replies calmly.

“So can you get it for me?” I ask, hating how desperate I sound. “Or I could go...”

“Now isn’t the right time,” he interrupts tersely.

“What do you mean?”

He stares back at me for a long moment, swiping a hand over his chin as if contemplating his response. “Business relations are... tense at the moment,” he mutters.

“Why? Aren’t you allied with my father?” I scowl, folding my arms tightly across my chest. “Wasn’t that the whole point of this sham of a marriage?”

Roman heaves a sigh, waving a hand dismissively. “This world is more nuanced than that, Eliza.”

A fresh wave of anger and indignation rushes to the surface, but when I open my mouth to respond, I startle at the sound of a throat clearing behind me. Whipping my head around, I find Niko standing in the doorway of Roman’s office, his blue-eyed gaze fixed on my husband.

“Hey boss, got a sec?” he asks.

Roman grunts in the affirmative, waving him inside. So I guess our conversation is over.

I should take that as my cue to leave, but I’m far too worked up and stubborn for my own good. I narrow my eyes on Roman, staring him down as I hear Niko enter the room behind me.

“I’m sure you remember my wife,” Roman murmurs, gesturing blandly in my direction.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Volkov,” Niko greets as he steps up alongside me, his smile brightening when I turn to meet his gaze.

I can’t help but smile back. He may be just another burly mobster, but his presence in the manor is like a ray of sunshine. “Nice to see you again, Niko,” I reply softly, an unwitting blush rising to my cheeks.

“How’s it going with Jekyll and Hyde?” he drawls.

My heart trips over its valves. I stare back at him dumbly, my jaw going slack and my brain short-circuiting.

Niko’s brows pinch together as he clocks my reaction. “The book you were reading?”

The pieces finally click together in my mind, a whoosh of air leaving my lungs. Of course he’s asking about the novel, not my psychopath of a husband.

“Oh, right,” I breathe, shaking my head with a girlish giggle. “Sorry, I... I finished it the other day.”

“And?” he prompts, grin widening. “What’d you think of the big twist?”

I shrug, another soft giggle slipping from my lips. “Kinda saw it coming,” I admit. “It was still good, though, you were right.”

“Eliza,” Roman interrupts sharply.

I snap my head in his direction, breath hitching when I meet his glacial glare.

He beckons me with a lift of his chin. “Come here.”

My posture stiffens as I stand frozen in indecision, cautiously assessing my husband’s tight expression.

Do I dare refuse his order and embarrass him in front of his colleague?

The wildcat in me wants to, but the housecat I’m trying to portray myself as would never. So, I beam a brittle, mirthless smile back at him, lifting my chin as I turn on a heel and step around his desk.

His eyes never leave mine as I approach. He swivels his chair in my direction, nodding to his lap. “Sit.”

Though I’m fighting to keep my composure, I feel my cheeks burn with humiliation as I step between his spread knees and lower myself down onto his thigh. This is just another one of his sick powerplays that I’ll force myself to endure. I need to allow him to win the battles if I’m going to win the war.

“Niko, take a seat,” Roman commands, gesturing to a chair across his desk while his other arm comes to dangle loosely around my waist.

My husband's second-in-command eases down to sit, the leather creaking beneath his weight as he shifts uncomfortably.

"I trust you're here with good news about the shortage in the recent shipment?" Roman prompts.

Niko flickers me a glance, hesitating for a moment before returning his gaze to Roman and nodding. "Yes, we were able to pin down the source. It turns out our middleman thought he could dip into the profits and it would go unnoticed."

"Where is he now?" Roman questions, his voice dropping to a dangerously low decibel.

"Took care of him myself," Niko replies with a proud lift of his chin.

I readjust my position on Roman's lap, subtly moving around in an effort to make myself a little more comfortable. His fingers close around my hip, grip tightening to hold me in place as he responds to Niko.

"Good. See to it that he didn't manage to bring anyone else in on his scheme. Clean house if you have to."

It's amazing how these men can discuss murder as if it's nothing more than a business transaction. I tune them out as they continue droning on, and though Roman's directive to sit still is clear, I can't help but wriggle again in a bid to escape the discomfort of something digging into the back of my thigh. My breath stalls when I realize what it is, jarring me back to reality.

He's hard.

My mind trips over itself at the impossibility, because when I regarded him before

coming over to sit on his lap, I was positive Dr. Jekyll was looking back at me. He's not the side of Roman who's always after a pound of my flesh. To the contrary, he's always seemed impervious to my feminine wiles– or at least I thought he was.

My head spins, a jumble of scattered thoughts ricocheting through my brain. This could be the opportunity I've been waiting for. The calmer side of Roman's personality is decidedly more reasonable, so if I can appeal to him, maybe I can finally get the leverage I've been seeking.

I shift my weight again, purposefully rubbing myself on his erection as I lean back against his chest. His muscles tense beneath me, cock thickening against my backside as he fights to retain his composure in front of Niko. It's obvious I'm making him uncomfortable, and I can't help but derive a sick sense of satisfaction at that realization. It's about time he experienced just a fraction of the discomfort I've endured at his hands.

Like when he had me on my knees in front of Clara.

He could do the same thing right now, in front of Niko... but rather than that thought inciting a wave of dread, I'm completely taken aback at the rush of titillation that spears through me as I envision Niko's piercing blue eyes fixed on me while I pleasure my husband, intensely watching my every move, wishing he could take his place...

Heat licks up my spine and I subtly rock over Roman's lap, rubbing back and forth over the stiff ridge of his shaft. I'm playing a dangerous game by teasing him this way, but I'm suddenly unconcerned about the consequences, so long as this ends with me writhing in the throes of climax.

His games usually do, so why shouldn't mine ?

Roman grips my hip tighter in warning, abruptly clearing his throat and cutting Niko off mid-sentence. “We can go over the rest of the details later,” he says gruffly. “Follow up with Sorrentino, see if he’ll fly out here for a meeting.”

“Will do, boss,” Niko replies with a dutiful nod, picking up on my husband’s dismissive tone and pushing up from his chair. “Anything else?”

“Close the door behind you,” Roman grumbles.

Niko nods again, those stunning baby blues darting my way one last time before he turns around and swiftly exits the office.

Well damn. There goes that fantasy.

As soon as the door snicks closed behind his second, Roman grabs me by the chin roughly, turning my face to his. “What do you think you’re doing?” he snarls.

I bat my lashes at him, playing innocent. “What do you mean? You’re the one who called me over to sit on your lap, I was just...”

“Are you that desperate for my attention?” he snaps, green eyes narrowing menacingly. “Or were you trying to get Niko’s?”

My heart stutters in my chest, fear wrapping its icy claws around my throat. Is my crush on Niko that obvious? From the way Roman’s looking at me, the answer is yes, and this just took a treacherous turn. If I don’t manage to quickly steer this train back on the track, I have a feeling Mr. Hyde will be coming out to play.

I turn at the waist, looping my arms around Roman’s neck and gazing into his emerald eyes with all the fraudulent adoration I can muster. “Can’t a wife desire her husband?” I purr.

He stares back at me disbelievingly, fingers flexing their grip around my hip. “Show me.”

“What?” I question, blinking at him.

“If you’re so eager to please me, then take your clothes off, wife,” he bites out, eyes darkening. “I want to see what I paid for.”

Hatred boils like acid in my veins, but I’m far too adept at faking smiles. It’s how I’ve survived all miserable twenty-two years of my existence, and it’s how I’ll make it out of this farce of a marriage alive.

I’m about to put on the performance of a lifetime.

Darting him my sultriest smile, I rise from his lap, taking a step backwards and toeing off my ankle boots. He swivels his chair to face me, eyes turning molten as he watches me drag my sweater dress up over my hips. I pull it off over my head, balling up the soft fabric in my hands before dropping it on his desk.

Roman leans back, bringing a fist to his mouth as he takes in the sight of me in my sheer black tights and lacy bra and panty set, gaze raking over my form appreciatively. Dr. Jekyll does prefer me in black, after all.

His stare is so intense that a shiver tracks up my spine as I slowly roll my tights down my hips, then remove my bra and panties, baring myself completely to him. He eats me up with his gaze as I step toward him, my breasts spilling forward as I lean in and slide my hands onto his thick shoulders. “Is this what you wanted?” I whisper huskily.

He doesn’t respond like he normally does. Every time I’ve played the seductress, he’s thrown me against the nearest surface and had his way with me. This time, he’s so

much more restrained. His gaze is no less heated than it usually is when I'm naked, but it's decidedly calmer. Eerily calm .

"Turn around and bend over the desk," he murmurs, the low, gravelly tone of his voice rattling down to my bones.

Fear and desire wage a war inside me as I move to comply with his directive, pressing my hips against the edge of his desk and bending forward over it. The wood is chilly beneath my palms as I lower myself down, stifling a whimper when my hard nipples scrape the frigid surface.

I brace myself for the press of his cock against my bare center, but it doesn't come. I don't hear him unfasten his pants or even rise out of his chair. The anticipation becomes too much, until I'm wiggling my ass in invitation, tempting the devil.

He doesn't rise to the bait.

The quiet persists.

"Are we doing this, or should I put my clothes back on?" I huff, whipping my head around to cut him a glare over my shoulder.

I shriek as his palm claps down on my ass, a sharp shot of pain firing through me.

"Is that any way to talk to your husband?" Roman growls, pushing to his feet.

"Is that any way to talk to your wife ?" I spit.

He lands another harsh slap on my ass in the exact same place as the first, so intense that a moan escapes my lips, unbidden. My mind goes blissfully quiet, overwhelmed by the rush of sensation.

“Do you like that?” he hums, his hand lingering on the cheek of my ass to rub out the sting. A surge of heat rushes to my core as his palm caresses my tingling skin, a rapturous wave of euphoria crashing through me as the pain ebbs.

From the tone of his voice, I can tell he wants me to like it.

But also... I think I actually do.

I turn to peer back at him over my shoulder, our gazes colliding. Damn , I’ve never seen him look at me like he is right now, as if he’s dangling on the precipice of his darkest fantasies coming to life. It shouldn’t excite me as much as it does.

Clenching my thighs against the ache throbbing between them, I sink my teeth into my lower lip, giving him a single nod. I can’t bring myself to say it, but some part of me likes the harsh slap of his palm against my ass. It’s not a cruel strike of anger; it’s a controlled and precise deliverance of pain that inexplicably heightens my arousal. And I want more .

A sinister grin stretches across his face as he lifts his palm, winding up to deliver a harsh smack to my opposite side. I yelp, body jolting at the strike of pain. I barely have time to recover before he slaps my ass again, alternating cheeks while a cacophony of whimpers and moans leave my lips. When he delivers a slap right between my legs, my elbows buckle and I drop down onto the desk, skin clapping against the slick wood and my panted breaths fogging up the lacquered surface.

Roman growls low in his throat as he kneads the flesh of my butt cheeks, my body going boneless in surrender. “I guess he was right about you after all,” he muses. “You are obedient.”

A fresh surge of anger ripples through me at the mention of my father, but it’s quickly quelled by more intense waves of pain and pleasure as Roman resumes

spanking me on my thighs, ass, and pussy until I'm reduced to a needy, writhing mess atop his desk.

"Please!" I wail, bucking my hips, the coil in my belly wound tight.

His hands stop rubbing my stinging skin, body going still. "Please what?"

I need to come so badly that I can't even form words, barely able to catch my breath.

"Please stop?" he questions.

"No!" I cry out.

"Then what do you want, wife?"

My cheeks burn, shame coating every word as I answer, "Please fuck me."

Once again, he doesn't immediately spring into action like I expect him to. He seems to almost contemplate it for a moment, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest as he says, "You're pretty when you beg."

My pulse races at the clink of his belt, body trembling with anticipation and desperate for relief. I'm like Roman's personal wind-up doll— he's been toying with me so much that one more crank of his wrist is all it'll take to set me off.

He shifts closer, a shudder running through me as the velvety head of his cock glides through my slick folds. Notching the tip at my opening, he shoves into me from behind and I instantly detonate, screaming in ecstasy while gushing all over his dick.

"Fuck," he grits out, fingertips digging bruises into my hips as my inner walls spasm around him. He fucks me with shallow thrusts as I ride out the waves of bliss, but the

moment I come back down and sag against his desk, he ups his pace, pressing a palm to the small of my back and rutting into me hard and fast.

Like always, it feels far better than it should, pressure building inside me again at an alarming rate. He always hits a sweet spot when he fucks me from behind that makes me see stars. I may hate my husband with a passion, but I'm definitely on friendly terms with his big dick. It's the only thing that makes this arrangement of ours somewhat bearable.

Roman reaches down and buries his fingers in my hair, gathering the wild strands up in his fist and using it to yank me upright. His other arm bands around my belly, pulling my back flush against his chest as he continues pulsing his hips, burying himself impossibly deeper inside me as the edge of his desk digs bruises into my upper thighs.

"Do you like when your husband fucks you, Eliza?" he growls in my ear, nipping the lobe.

"Yes!" I cry out shamelessly.

His hand snakes down my belly, his skilled fingers deftly locating my clit. "Then come for me again, wife. Show me how much you love it."

Fuck, I do love it. It's impossible not to when it feels this good, and I hate myself for enjoying every second. His fingers tighten in my hair, pinpricks of pain breaking out over my scalp as his cock slams into me, fingers rubbing my clit expertly.

Fireworks explode behind my eyelids as I shatter, coming so hard that I damn near black out from the intensity. Roman roars in my ear as he snaps his hips forward hard, burying himself to the hilt and following me right over the edge of oblivion. Then he falls back into his desk chair, taking me with him, both of us sweaty and

breathless.

His arms maintain a possessive grip around my body as I lay back against his chest, panting for air. He's still seated inside me, his cum trickling down my inner thigh from where our bodies are joined. Good thing Dr. Hargrove placed that birth control implant— the last thing I want is to carry Roman's evil spawn. That morbid thought has never even crossed my mind before since he's never come inside me. He always pulls out, painting me with his cum like a mark of ownership. I suppose he's now marked me on the inside, too, and something about that feels far too intimate for our travesty of a marriage.

Roman's thumb sweeps in lazy strokes over my belly as we slowly catch our breath, traveling up my ribcage and tracing over the ridges of my bones. "Have you been eating?" he rasps.

I jolt upright, immediately offended. "What?" I choke, his dick slipping out as I twist around to face him. "Of course I have."

"Then why is Clara telling me otherwise?" he questions, arching a brow.

"She needs to mind her own business," I snap.

"She needs to mind whoever pays her," he replies, staring me down.

I glare back at him, shoving off his lap and snatching my clothes from the desk. I hastily start putting them back on, cringing when I have to pull my panties up my sticky thighs. I need to shower him off my skin immediately, but I have a sick feeling that no amount of washing will ever truly get me clean again.

Roman just sits back and silently watches as I get dressed, not even bothering to tuck his deflated dick back into his slacks. He got what he wanted, after all. It's his world,

and I'm just living in it as a pawn on his chessboard when I should be the motherfucking queen .

He'll realize what I really am the moment I escape him.

Shoving my feet back into my boots, I storm for the door, not even sparing Roman a glance as I yank it open stomp out of his office. It'll be a cold day in hell before I willingly spread my legs for him again.

Too bad winter's on its way and hell is my new home address.

“ I brought wine!” Cherie announces the moment Roman pulls open the front door of the manor, brandishing a bottle of Rosé from behind her back and waving it back and forth.

“Great!” I reply with all the fake enthusiasm I can muster. I force a smile to my lips, trying to match her energy, but this woman takes perky to a whole new level. If she were a dog, she’d be a chihuahua.

Anton tosses an arm over his wife’s shoulders, grinning like a fool in love as he tucks her in tighter and lifts his gaze to Roman.

“Please, come in,” my husband prompts, his own arm dangling loosely around my waist. I’ll bet we look like the perfect couple right now, smiling and greeting our guests at the threshold of our home. From outward appearances, nobody would know this is all a facade.

The hem of Cherie’s short lavender dress swishes around her thighs as Anton steers her inside, her eyes widening in awe when she glances around the expansive foyer. “This place is incredible,” she breathes, long lashes fluttering as she blinks to take it all in. “How long have you lived here?”

“The manor has been in the family for generations,” Roman replies proudly, fingers tightening around my hip. He pulls me in closer to his side, prompting me to crane my neck and look up at him. “Why don’t you show Cherie to the terrace?” he suggests.

Of course, this was all previously orchestrated. Roman asked Anton to the manor to discuss business, and evidently Cherie insisted on tagging along under the guise of ‘female bonding’. I’m not sure what exactly we’ll be bonding over since I barely know the woman, but far be it for me to pass up a chance at making a connection with someone other than the cast of souls trapped on the estate. I’ve been so isolated lately that I’m slowly starting to lose my mind here.

Roman ushers Anton to his office while I’m left to lead Cherie through the winding halls of the manor, her head on a swivel as she ooh- s and ahh- s in fascination at every portrait and room we pass. To her, this place is a spectacle; a time-capsule of generational wealth. She has no idea how creepy it is to actually live here.

The horrors persist, but so do I.

“I had Clara make chicken marsala,” I say as we approach the door to the terrace, glancing back at Cherie over my shoulder. “I doubt it’ll hold a candle to the one you had in Italy, but I figured it was a safe bet since you’d mentioned you liked it.”

She beams a smile at me. “Italian food, Italian wine, sounds like my kind of afternoon!” Cherie sing-songs as she follows me outside. It’s unseasonably warm today, so when Clara suggested moving our luncheon to the terrace, I jumped at the opportunity. Any excuse to get out of the gloom of the manor.

The red soles of Cherie’s designer heels click against the stamped concrete as we move across the terrace, echoing my own. “Okay, this place is amazing,” she gushes, lifting a hand to shield her eyes from the sun as she sweeps her appreciative gaze over the perfectly-clipped lawn and thick forest beyond. “Ugh, you’re like right in the middle of nature out here! We definitely don’t get this in the city.”

“You live in the city?” I ask, interest piqued.

“Part time, yeah,” she breathes, tucking an espresso strand of hair behind her ear as she spins to face me. “It was a hike to get out here, but Anton told me it was worth it, and he’s totally right.”

I fake a smile and nod in agreement, biting back the sarcastic retort on the tip of my tongue. Cherie seems sweet, but given her husband’s affiliation with mine, I’d be an idiot not to keep my guard up around her. The role I play for Roman as his demure, compliant wife extends to his associates, too.

We take our seats on opposite sides of the square wrought-iron table, already pristinely set with a short vase of black dahlias as the centerpiece. They’re currently in bloom in the gardens, so I asked Lev to cut some for the occasion— because despite my miserable existence here at the manor, I’m nothing short of an impeccable hostess. Those ridiculous etiquette lessons I was forced to endure in my early teens are finally paying off.

Clara must’ve been spying when our guests arrived, because she quickly appears with a wine key and two glasses, uncorking and pouring the Rosé while Cherie tells me all about the vineyard she and Anton procured it from in Italy. I feign interest, smiling and nodding as I sip from my glass. She’s still going on about how quaint and picturesque the winery is when Clara returns with our plates of food, barely even looking my way as she sets them down on the table in front of us.

I definitely didn’t earn any points with Clara when I tattled to Roman about giving her my list.

If I didn’t resent her so much, I’d try to smooth things over. As it is, though, I’m not really interested in putting forth effort with the housemaid when she’s been so cold and distant from day one. And besides, I’ve got a much better prospective friend sitting right across from me.

Cherie and I pick at our meals as we chat about the shift in the weather and Anton's plans to whisk her away to the Maldives for the holidays, the conversation flowing more easily with each glass of wine we sink. It isn't long before we reach the bottom of the bottle, a giggle slipping from my throat as I split the last of it between our glasses.

I can't remember the last time I was this buzzed in the middle of the afternoon. Considering how bleak my life has become, perhaps I should day drink more often.

"So, what's your place like in the city?" I ask, toying with the stem of my glass as I relax back in my chair.

"Oh, it's lush," she quips, hazel eyes sparkling. "Our building's in Central Park South with a view of fifth avenue. Anton paid a small fortune, but it's worth every penny. You two should come over for dinner sometime, see it for yourself!"

"I'd love that," I reply enthusiastically, head bobbing up and down. There's lots of traffic and people in the city. I'll bet I could disappear easily there, if given the chance.

"I'll make sure it happens, then," she replies with a wink, and I have no doubt that's true. Cherie seems like the type of woman who can bat her lashes and flirt her way into getting whatever she desires. Not only is she ridiculously beautiful, but her husband seems to be completely enamored with her. If only all of us could be so lucky.

"So, how's married life?" she asks, as if she's reading my damn mind.

"Great," I chirp, forcing a brittle smile as I lift my glass to my lips.

Cherie leans forward conspiratorially, dropping her voice low. "I'll bet Roman's wild

in bed, isn't he?" she probes, wagging her brows.

I choke on the sip of wine I was taking, sputtering to catch my breath as Cherie loses herself in a fit of giggles.

"What? It's just us girls!" she laughs. "C'mon, satisfy my curiosity. If we can't dish about our husbands, then what else is there?"

She's right— the two of us don't have much in common other than who we're married to. This is a friendship based purely on circumstance, and if I want to give it a chance to grow and thrive, then I need to water the seeds we've planted. Lord knows I could use a friend.

"Yeah, he's..." I set my wine glass back down as I trail off, clearing my throat while I consider an appropriate way to respond. I settle on, "The sex is good," though that's a colossal understatement. The sex is fucking phenomenal . Every time Roman's inside me, I forget why I hate him so much.

"I knew it!" she squeals, grinning like a cat as a blush heats my cheeks. "He's probably one of those super bossy, dominant types, isn't he?"

I avoid her question by draining the rest of the wine in my glass, though I'm sure my reddened face is answer enough.

"Fine, you don't have to give me all the details," she giggles, waving me off. "For the record, Anton's an incredible lover. I'm convinced that all men in their line of work are. All that pent-up aggression needs an outlet, right?"

I shake my head with a soft chuckle. Though my own experience is limited, I can't disagree.

Cherie grins smugly as she raises her glass and sips the last of her Rosé, turning to gaze out over the lawn. I flinch when she suddenly jolts forward in her chair, eyes widening in fear. “Oh my god, is that a bear?” she gasps.

I snap my head sideways to follow her line of sight, and this girl’s lucky she’s pretty, because she’s definitely not the brightest. “No, that’s just one of the dogs,” I reassure, a smile coming to my lips as I watch Nox trotting happily along the perimeter of the hedges. “There’s another around here somewhere, the two of them guard the property.”

She swings her nervous gaze back on me. “Oh. I guess that makes sense, considering you’re out here in the middle of nowhere. Though I don’t really do dogs. I’d just have Anton hire security.”

“My husband likes his privacy,” I murmur, glancing across the lawn again. “And they may look mean, but they’re both big babies. Vesper takes a little more warming up, but Nox took to me right away.”

“Nox?” Cherie repeats, snorting a laugh. “Wow, egomaniac much?”

I turn to meet her eyes, brow creasing in confusion. Before she can elaborate further, though, we’re interrupted by the familiar clack of Clara’s Mary Janes as she emerges from the house, crossing the terrace to come collect our plates.

“Tell me you’ve got more wine?” Cherie pouts, eyeing the empty Rosé bottle wistfully.

“I’m not sure if we have Rosé, but...” I trail off, looking to Clara for confirmation as she begins clearing the table. Unsurprisingly, she gives me nothing, not even making eye contact.

“How about white?” Cherie prompts.

“Clara?” I ask, and she begrudgingly turns her gaze on me, silently awaiting my directive. “Can you bring us a bottle of white, please?”

“Of course, Mrs. Volkov,” she replies politely, giving me a curt nod before turning on a heel and heading back inside.

“You’ll have to give me a tour of this place,” Cherie comments as she watches Clara disappear into the manor. “The boys will be busy with business for a while, and I’ve always been fascinated with old architecture. It’s so delightfully spooky.”

“It’s definitely taken some getting used to,” I murmur, eyeing the crumbling stone exterior of the manor with disdain.

“Do you think it’s haunted?” she asks excitedly.

Definitely. “Maybe,” I shrug.

Cherie’s eyes suddenly pop wide, as if a lightbulb has just gone off in her head. “Oh my gosh, you should host a big Halloween party here!” she suggests eagerly. “I know it’s less than a month away, but you wouldn’t even have to do much to decorate, this place already has the perfect vibe.”

“We do have a ballroom,” I muse, fingering the stem of my empty wine glass and wishing Clara would hurry back with the new bottle. Discussing my prison so casually definitely warrants more wine.

“Seriously?” Cherie gasps, blinking her big hazel eyes at me. “Okay, then you definitely need to have a party.”

“We’ll see,” I chuckle, exhaling a breath of relief when Clara steps out onto the terrace with a bottle of white in her grasp. Swinging my gaze back over to Cherie, I add, “Like I said, my husband enjoys his privacy.”

“Don’t they all?” she sighs, lips curving in a mischievous smirk. “Okay, that’s a lie, Anton’s as flashy as they come. You know he bought me this gaudy thing just so he could show it off?” She raises her left hand, the obscenely large yellow diamond on her finger glittering as it catches the light. “I’m not even big on canary diamonds, but I didn’t have the heart to tell him when he gave it to me. He said his rare jewel deserved one of her own...” she leans in, narrowing her eyes, “which would be a whole lot sweeter if he didn’t always recycle that line with his business associates just so he can brag about how much it cost him.”

The two of us share a laugh as Clara refills our glasses, leaving us with the bottle and heading back inside. Reaching for my wine, I eye the massive rock sitting on my own ring finger, suddenly wishing I had a cute anecdote to add to our conversation. Somehow, I doubt even Cherie could romanticize Roman tossing the ring box at me in the back of a car and demanding I put it on.

“Does Anton ever work with Niko?” I ask casually, changing the subject to avoid her asking about my own proposal– or lack thereof.

“Sometimes,” she shrugs. “He typically deals with Roman directly. Hierarchy, and all that.” She waves a hand dismissively as she takes a big sip of wine, her delicate throat bobbing with her swallow as she lowers her glass and licks the residue from her lips. “I don’t typically go for blondes, but for Niko, I’d make an exception. That man can get it.”

Yeah he can. A blush unwittingly rises to my cheeks, which I quickly cover up by raising my glass and downing more wine.

“He must be over here a lot for how closely he works with the Volkovs, huh?” Cherie muses.

I nod as I swallow, setting my glass back down on the table in front of me. “Yeah, he said he was practically raised here. Something about their fathers being in business together, I think.”

Cherie shrugs, evidently not knowing any more about the inner workings of the organization than I do. Pity . “Anton’s second is a complete ogre,” she remarks, grimacing. “You should count yourself lucky for the eye candy. Not that you need it, considering who you’re married to.”

“Speaking of,” I mumble, darting a quick glance toward the door to ensure nobody’s listening in. “You mentioned at dinner that you knew Roman’s ex?”

Cherie gives me a pitying look as she nods. “I only met her once. So sad what happened. But hey, at least he found you , right?”

She knows something.

I sit up straighter, opening my mouth to ask what happened to the woman I replaced when I startle at the sound of a throat clearing, whipping my head side sideways to see Roman and Anton emerging from the manor.

“Sorry to cut this short, ladies, but we’ve had some urgent business come up and Anton needs to get back to the city,” Roman informs us as the two of them stride in our direction, looking like a pair of GQ models in their well-tailored suits.

Cherie looks to her husband, shoving her lower lip out in a pout of protest.

“Tell me you’re not on your second bottle,” Anton murmurs as he advances toward

her, a teasing lilt to his tone.

Her lips split into a wide grin. “Guilty,” she giggles, batting her lashes and tossing back her dark hair.

“We really should get going then, she’s far too chatty when she drinks wine,” Anton jokes, sliding Roman a smirk.

“I was enjoying our chat,” I say with a genuine smile. “Your wife’s lovely.”

“Don’t I know it,” Anton quips. He pulls Cherie up from her seat, yanking her in close and smacking a kiss on her lips.

“We’ll walk you out,” Roman murmurs as he comes over to my chair and extends a hand toward me.

I place mine in his and he helps me to my feet like a perfect gentleman, guiding me away from the table with a hand on the small of my back. I’m actually grateful for it since I’m a bit wobbly after all the wine. It feels like I’m floating alongside Roman as we lead our guests through the manor to the foyer, Cherie chattering animatedly the entire way. When we go to say our goodbyes, she catches me off guard by throwing her arms around my neck, yanking me in for a hug like we’re best friends.

“Next time, dinner at our place,” she insists as she pulls back from the embrace, dazzling me with one last smile.

“Absolutely,” I agree, nodding emphatically.

Anton ushers her out the door with a muttered apology to Roman, who closes it behind them and engages the deadbolt before turning to face me, his expression impassive.

My face flushes hot as I hold his stare, suddenly all too aware of how close we're standing to one another. With our guest's departure, our ruse of being a happy couple has officially ended— yet for some reason, I don't make any move to back away from him. I'm trapped in that emerald-eyed gaze, my palms turning clammy and my pulse picking up speed.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Roman grumbles.

“Like what?” I ask breathily.

He steps in closer and leans down, his lips tickling the shell of my ear as he murmurs, “Like you want to get fucked.”

My heart stutters in my chest, a flood of heat rushing to my core. He pulls back to meet my eyes, my mouth hanging open as I struggle for the words to respond.

My body language must tell him all he needs to know, because the corner of his mouth lifts infinitesimally, his hand returning to my lower back. “Come to my office,” he commands in a low, gravelly tone, his palm pressing forward firmly to guide me down the hall with him.

And I hate that I go willingly.

I can't even remember the last time I felt this content. Whatever business came up between Roman and Anton during their meeting yesterday has taken him away for the night, so I can actually relax without the constant apprehension of facing one of my husband's mood swings. For once, I'm not looking over my shoulder, trapped in a perpetual state of fight or flight. It's just me and the dogs, the three of us happily lounging together in the study.

Clara's also around here somewhere, but since she never approves of me inviting Nox and Vesper inside, she's been communicating her dissatisfaction by avoiding this room all evening. It's probably for the best since I doubt she'd approve of me pulling the cushions off the couch, either. I've made a little nest for us on the floor in front of the hearth, enjoying the cozy warmth of the fire while flipping through the pages of a poetry book.

I figured I needed a change of pace after Jekyll and Hyde. I was able to draw far too many comparisons between that story and my real life, so I went for something I won't be able to relate to at all— a book of sappy love poems. It was tucked on a shelf in here amongst the other classic literature, though I can't imagine why Roman would even include something like this in his collection. He's the furthest thing from a romantic.

Nox makes for a great pillow, and Vesper even allowed me to toss my legs over his body— after an annoyed grunt, of course. In light of Cherie's comment yesterday, I unboxed my shiny new phone this morning to search for the meaning of the dogs' names. They're both Latin words for night, so I guess I now understand why she

found them amusing. Roman has fully committed to the gothic vibe of the manor.

The familiar clack of Clara's shoes rings out from the hall, prompting me to cast a glance toward the doorway of the study as she steps inside. She pauses at the sight of me snuggled up with the dogs, a flicker of annoyance crossing her features. Ever the consummate professional, she quickly schools her expression and clears her throat.

"Is there anything else you need before I leave for the night, Mrs. Volkov?"

"No, thank you, Clara," I murmur in reply, eager to get rid of her.

She nods curtly, her beady-eyed gaze flickering to my furry pillow and footrest. "Be sure to let the dogs out before you turn in."

"Of course," I agree with a brittle smile, even though I fully plan on taking them upstairs with me when I go to bed. "Have a good night."

She tips her head and turns on a heel to leave, the clipping sound of her Mary Janes fading with her retreat. Good riddance.

A few minutes pass before the realization sinks in that this is the first time I've been completely alone in the manor. Rather than that thought triggering a feeling of dread, however, a ripple of excitement runs through me. If I want to explore the areas of the house that have been deemed off-limits, now's my chance. There's nobody here to stop me.

Vesper grunts as I ease my legs off his back, sitting up and tossing my book aside. "You guys wanna go on an adventure?" I ask as I push to my feet, pulling my cardigan tighter around my body.

Nox pops up right away, wagging his stubby little tail and looking to me for

direction.

“C’mon, let’s go,” I whisper conspiratorially, pivoting around and starting for the hall.

Yeah, I fully realize how ridiculous it is that I’m talking to a dog like he’s a person. The dogs are better company than the humans around here are, though, and there’s nobody to witness me making a fool of myself as I creep through the halls chattering to them. We’re all alone in this big old house, and I’m taking full advantage.

The tippy-tap of the dogs’ toenails against the floor follows me as I creep through the darkened hallways of the manor, pausing at the base of the stairs when I reach the foyer. The black chandelier glitters in the pale moonlight, casting a shadow right over the split in the staircase below it. I’ve climbed these stairs many times, but I’ve always gone to the left. Tonight, I’m going right.

Drawing a deep breath, I reach out to set my hand on the cold stone banister, trailing my palm along it as I begin to ascend. My heart beats harder with every step, my throat tightening with apprehension as I follow the curve to the right. My grandfather used to say if you’re scared of wolves, don’t go in the woods – yet here I am, terrified of the big bad wolf and marching straight for his lair in the east wing.

I linger for a few seconds at the top of the landing, the dogs trotting ahead down the hall as I hold my breath and listen for any sound. Even though I know he’s gone for the night, part of me expects Roman to materialize before my eyes like a specter at any given moment, prepared to dole out punishment for daring to defy him. Maybe part of me even wants it. The thrill of breaking the rules is driven by the fear of getting caught, after all, but I don’t fall into any traps or trigger any hidden alarms as I advance down the hall of the east wing. It’s terribly anticlimactic.

I try the knob of each door I pass along the hall, finding a couple of guest rooms, a

lounge, and another small library. My husband clearly has a thing for books. I'm nearing the end of the corridor when I turn the knob on a door and finally discover a large suite that actually looks lived in, a wave of titillation spearing through me as I step inside and survey the interior.

This must be where he sleeps. The room is easily double the size of my own, well-appointed with dark wood furniture and a large four-poster bed draped in black linens. It's unmade, the black silk sheets rumpled and hanging off the side. Clara definitely wouldn't approve.

There's a large desk across the room by the windows, the surface of which is jam-packed with monitors and computer accessories. The sight of it is a little bit jarring, considering it holds more technology than I've seen in the rest of the manor combined. Too bad I'm not some prolific hacker who can use it to my advantage.

My pulse picks up speed as I wander closer to the desk, gaze hooking on a brass key resting atop the shiny lacquered surface. One that looks a whole lot like the key Roman used to lock the tower door. I snatch it up and slip it into the pocket of my cardigan, then reach for the top drawer of the desk, pulling it open and peering inside to snoop.

The first thing I see is a shiny black handgun. I pause to consider whether I should take it, but then something else catches my eye—a photograph resting just beneath the barrel of the firearm. Reaching into the drawer, I carefully shift the gun aside, lifting the picture to get a better look.

My blood turns to ice in my veins the moment my brain registers what I'm looking at. It's a woman— blonde, petite, and around my age. A woman who looks startlingly like me .

My breath catches, pulse taking off at a gallop as I shove the photo into my pocket

and spin back around, rushing for the door.

I need to get out of here.

Everyone refuses to talk about the former Mrs. Volkov, but she clearly met some untimely demise.

This must be her.

She looks like me.

Am I next?

I'm two steps from the threshold when Roman suddenly appears in the doorway, his towering form casting a long shadow and blocking my retreat. I stop in my tracks at the sight of him, mouth popping open in shock.

"What are you doing in here, Eliza?" he demands, his voice a low, eerie monotone.

My heart trips over its valves, lungs seizing. "I-I thought you were out for the night," I sputter, slinking back a step.

He swipes a hand over his chin, his intense green-eyed gaze slowly raking over me from head to toe. "Change of plans," he murmurs. "Didn't Clara tell you?"

Fucking Clara . As if I didn't already despise that bitch.

"N-no," I reply feebly, my hands trembling as I wring them in front of me.

There's a handgun in the top drawer of the desk. If I can just get ahold of it...

“You know you’re forbidden from entering this wing of the manor,” Roman sighs, shaking his head in disapproval as he advances a step closer.

I match it with a step of my own backwards, preserving the distance between us while remaining acutely aware of just how far I am from the desk.

Maybe I can make a run for it. I’ll just have to hope the gun’s loaded...

“Since you broke the rules, I’m afraid I’ll have to punish you,” he drawls, eyes sparkling in twisted delight as he dips his chin. “On your knees, pet.”

My breath hitches, a fresh surge of adrenaline spearing through me. I have two options– take my chances with the gun or take my chances with his punishment. Both are equally as dangerous, yet only one excites me.

Holding my husband’s gaze, I slowly lower myself to the floor in surrender like the obedient, docile wife he thinks I am, praying that my compliance will spare me the worst of his wrath. The corner of his mouth lifts in satisfaction when my knees hit the hardwood, as if he wasn’t expecting me to obey so easily. As if he hasn’t been trying to condition this exact behavior. He thinks he’s in control, but I’ve learned that there’s power here on my knees.

Roman closes the remaining distance between us in two long strides, reaching out to rest a large hand atop my head. “Good girl,” he murmurs, stroking my hair back gently.

I release a breathy exhale as his praise washes over me like a drug, my internal scales tipping from fear to arousal on a dime. It’s amazing how quickly the tides can shift nowadays, as if my body has become attuned to his signals. I don’t need to be afraid of him when he’s looking at me like he is right now. That’s lust for my body in his eyes, not for my blood.

It's exhausting to put on an act for my husband every day, but this is the only time I don't have to play pretend with him. I like it when he uses me as his own personal fuck-toy. When I'm lost to the sensations of pain or pleasure, my mind goes gloriously blank and I forget that I'm trapped here; forget that I married a monster. There's a freedom in letting go that I've come to crave.

He nods to his belt and I reach for it, unfastening the buckle and popping the button on his slacks. It's evident how hard he is from the bulge straining against the fabric, but I still draw a short gasp when I reach inside and my palm meets the velvet of his skin, his breath hitching as I wrap my fingers around his steel and pull him out. He's hot and heavy in my hand as I stroke him, licking my lips and gazing up into his eyes demurely.

"Open up," Roman commands, his fingers tightening in my hair to tug me closer. "Stick out your tongue."

I instantly comply, tasting the saltiness of his precum as the tip of his cock presses against it. Licking it away, I swirl my tongue over his broad head, still pumping him in my fist while awaiting my next directive.

"Suck."

Closing my lips around his tip, I hollow out my cheeks, sucking hard as I glide down his shaft to take more of him in my mouth. He groans in pleasure, pinpricks of pain breaking out over my scalp as the hand in my hair tightens. Then he drives his hips forward, forcing me to let go and swallow him deeper, my hands landing on his thighs to brace myself for the onslaught as he starts roughly fucking my throat.

I choke around his girth, fighting for air as tears spring to my eyes and spit dribbles down my chin. My distress only seems to heighten his arousal, those piercing green eyes turning molten as his tip punches at the back of my throat with every brutal

thrust. He shoves his cock in deeper until my lips are kissing the base, keeping me there with his tight hold on my hair while I gag around him. My lungs seize with the need for oxygen, hands clawing at his thighs, black spots dotting my vision.

For a second, I wonder if I was wrong and this is how it ends. Then he suddenly yanks me off, releasing his grip on my hair and sending me collapsing to the ground, gasping for breath.

“Strip and get on the bed,” Roman growls in a low, sinister tone.

My chest heaves as I lift my head to meet his gaze, glaring up at him defiantly. There’s no mercy in his soulless eyes; no trace of sympathy or compassion after nearly suffocating me. All I see is the burning heat of his desire as I wipe the saliva from my chin and slowly ease up to my feet, undressing for him.

I’m careful in removing my cardigan so the things I stole from his desk don’t slip from the pocket, taking off the rest of my clothes quickly and dropping them to the floor. Roman lazily strokes himself as he watches me strip down, but when I turn to start for the bed, he steps in closer, setting a firm hand on my shoulder. “Crawl,” he demands, the look in his eyes daring me to refuse.

My breath catches, mouth popping open in silent protest. Just when I think my husband can’t possibly debase me any further, he proves me wrong. His hand presses down on my shoulder and my cheeks burn with humiliation as I allow him to guide me to my knees, tipping forward to plant my palms against the cold floor. I fix my gaze on the bed across the room and swallow thickly, forcing myself to move.

The hardwood feels like ice beneath my skin as I crawl forward on my hands and knees, feeling the weight of Roman’s stare on my naked body the whole way. My core tightens when I hear the rustle of him undressing, heat licking up my spine at the sound of him prowling up behind me when I reach the edge of the bed.

“Such an obedient little slut,” he remarks, stooping down to lift me off the floor. He tosses me onto the mattress like a ragdoll and I land on my back in the tangle of soft black silk, my heart threatening to beat out of my chest when I take in the sight of my husband’s nude form looming over me.

I’ve bared myself to him countless times, but until now, I’ve never actually seen him naked. The sight of Roman’s deliciously sculpted body steals the air from my lungs, his powerful muscles rippling beneath his olive skin as he climbs onto the bed and shoves my legs apart, dropping down between them and sinking his teeth into the flesh of my inner thigh.

I cry out, back arching off the bed as pain ricochets through me, but then his thumb lands on my clit and the sensation twists to pleasure, my mind slipping to that fuzzy place between reality and oblivion. I claw at the sheets, panting and writhing as Roman bites his way up my inner thighs, rubbing tortuous circles around my clit and pinching it between his fingers. The stubble on his jaw rasps against my skin as he draws closer to the apex, his warm breath washing over my mound.

My body coils in anticipation, and when I feel the warmth of Roman’s tongue against my clit, I nearly detonate. It’s like nothing I’ve ever felt before, my thighs trembling as he suctions his lips over the sensitive bud and flicks it with his tongue.

“Holy shit,” I gasp, bucking my hips against his face as he ravishes me with his lips and tongue and teeth. If this is punishment, I’ll keep right on misbehaving.

He anchors me to the bed with one hand against my belly, bringing the other between my legs and spearing a finger into me as he sucks and nips my clit. The coil inside me winds tighter, my breaths coming out in short pants as he drives me closer and closer to the edge of bliss...

Then he stops .

Roman abruptly pulls away, rocking back on his heels and gazing down at me with a cruel smirk on his glistening lips.

“What the hell?” I choke, punching my fists against the mattress and pushing up on my elbows. “Why’d you stop?”

“This is a punishment, remember?” he muses.

My mouth falls open in shocked indignation, blood rushing to my ears.

Is he fucking with me right now?

A low chuckle rumbles in his chest as he crawls up my body, his hips resting in the cradle of my thighs and the velvet of his cock pressing against my center. Reaching between us, he notches the tip at my opening, stealing my breath as he shoves inside.

My hands fly up to grip his shoulders, fingernails digging into his skin as he starts fucking me ruthlessly. His washboard abs bunch and flex with every hard punch of his hips, shadows clinging to the sharp angles of his roguishly handsome face. I hate how attracted I am to this man, and I hate that I can’t look away as he pounds me into the mattress, driving me right back to the brink of ruin.

The moment my climax is within reach, Roman snatches it away again, pulling out and flipping me over onto my belly. I cry out in frustration as his hands grip my hips, lifting me to my knees.

“Please,” I choke as I fist the satin sheets, the torture of his edging reducing me to begging.

Roman’s palm lands on my ass with a hard smack, my eyes rolling back as the shot of pain sends a fresh flood of heat surging through me. I wiggle my ass in invitation for

him to spank me again, but he just lines up and thrusts into me from behind, groaning in satisfaction as my inner walls clench around him.

His fingers sink into the flesh of my ass cheeks as he drags out halfway and shoves back in to the hilt, my eyes rolling back in my head as his tip hits a spot inside that has me seeing stars. A wanton moan falls from my lips as he ruts into me hard and fast, turning into a strangled yelp when I feel his thumb press against my rear hole.

“Shh, relax, pet,” he coaxes, slowing his thrusts as his digit presses harder in demand.

I release a shaky exhale, my muscles slackening to let him in. With his cock still buried deep in my pussy, he slips the tip of his thumb past the tight ring of muscle, pushing it in my ass to the knuckle as I choke on a gasp. It’s a completely foreign feeling, but it’s actually... good . Different, but good .

“I can’t wait to fuck this tight little ass of yours,” Roman rasps, picking up the pace of his thrusts as he pumps his thumb in and out of my back hole.

I whimper low in my throat, unsure whether it’s in protest or anticipation while I’m lost to the overwhelming rush of sensation coursing through my body. I’m wound up tighter than a bowstring, desperate for release, every savage thrust driving me to the verge of ecstasy.

As if he knows I’m about to unravel, Roman abruptly pulls out with a gravelly moan, pumping himself in a fist and painting my ass with hot ropes of cum. A string of incoherent curses leaves my lips as my core clenches on air, aching at the sudden loss of him inside me.

He smears his release into my skin with his thumbs, leaning over to sink his teeth into my ass cheek.

“Ow!” I shriek, jerking away from him and rolling over to sit up.

Roman flops back on the bed, bringing his arms up behind his head and reclining against the pillows with a sated smirk. “Go on,” he drawls, tipping his head toward the door. “Back to your wing.”

My jaw goes slack. “But...”

“But what, you didn’t get to come?” he scoffs, lifting a brow. “I did say this was a punishment, didn’t I?”

I blink at him disbelievingly, my lower lip trembling in fury. I’m so tightly wound that every muscle in my body is tense, my heart beating a riot in my chest.

“Maybe next time, you’ll think twice about defying me,” he adds smugly.

I suddenly understand why female black widow spiders eat the male after mating, because right now, I want nothing more than to rip my husband’s head off his shoulders and bathe in his blood. My chest heaves as I glare daggers at Roman, fingers itching to wrap around his throat and squeeze the life out of him.

It takes everything in me to swallow my vehemence and climb off the bed. I strut across the room and gather my clothes from the floor, balling them up in my arms and marching for the door without so much as a backward glance.

I half expect the dogs to be waiting for me when I emerge from Roman’s room, but they’re nowhere to be found when I step out into the hall and scurry back toward my own wing of the manor. If I wasn’t naked and suffering from being edged within an inch of my life, I might go looking for them, but there’s a more pressing need I have to tend to.

I return to my room and go right for the shower, cranking it on and jumping underneath the spray before it even has a chance to get warm. The freezing water sluices over my skin, punching the air from my lungs as I drop a hand between my legs and frantically rub my clit, needing to come more than I need oxygen. Visions of my husband dance through my mind as I work to grant myself the release I so desperately need, shame setting in when the image of his naked body makes me unravel.

Because I hate him.

And I hate myself for not fully believing that I do anymore.

20

My cardigan is still hanging in the back of my closet, the key and photograph safely hidden in the pocket. I tucked it away the night Roman caught me, figuring that if he came looking for the items I stole, he wouldn't likely think to rummage through my clothes. He hasn't come looking yet, but that doesn't mean I haven't been on my best behavior in the days since he caught me snooping so I don't draw further suspicion.

I'm just too curious for my own good.

I'm definitely not actively plotting my escape.

Maybe once I make my getaway, I'll pursue work as an actress somewhere. I have no formal training, but I've been putting on an Oscar-worthy performance for my husband.

Unfortunately, my plans are currently on hold so I don't run the risk of getting caught again. Once can be written off as a mistake. Twice, and he'll know I'm up to something. I'm sure Roman would jump at the chance to dole out another one of his punishments, but I'd rather not be edged within an inch of my life again. Or worse, if my theory about what happened to the former Mrs. Volkov proves true.

Now, when I feel the shadow in my room at night, I think of her – the woman in the photograph. And I'm honestly not sure which is more unsettling; the fact that I now know what she looked like, or that she looked like me .

I guess my husband has a type.

All the more reason to lay low and bide my time until I can escape him.

The trouble is, as much as I despise the man, some part of me inexplicably craves his attention.

Call it boredom.

Call it madness.

Whatever it is, the thrill of capturing and holding that attention has become like an addiction I can't kick— I keep right on chasing the high despite knowing it's hazardous to my health. My morbid fascination with tempting the devil is the reason I'm wearing my red robe over my pajamas tonight instead of my black one. It's the reason I'm wandering toward the study before bed to exchange the poetry book I'd borrowed for something new, knowing full well that he's lurking inside.

Even after weeks of cohabitating, the sight of Roman still gives me pause when I enter a room. He's disarmingly handsome; deceptively appealing to the eye. But I've become well-acquainted with the monster hidden beneath that beautiful skin.

I don't catch him in the act of doing anything nefarious. To the contrary, he's more relaxed and unassuming than I've ever seen him, settled on one of the sofas by the fire with a book in his hands. He glances up from the pages of the novel in his grasp as I enter the study, the two of us holding eye contact for a beat before his gaze drops to the poetry book I'm carrying.

"Interesting choice," he murmurs, almost to himself.

I make a scoffing sound in my throat. "You've actually read it?"

"Why else would I own it?" he replies, arching a dark brow.

I roll my eyes as I advance into the room, the lace hem of my red silk robe tickling my thighs with every step. “You can’t possibly have read all the books in this house.”

“All the ones worth reading,” he mumbles, his gaze touring my form as I draw closer.

“And this one is?” I ask dubiously, stopping in front of him and holding it up.

He tilts his head thoughtfully. “Do you not agree?”

I look down at the book in my hands. “All of the poems seemed pretty sappy to me,” I mutter.

“Maybe you’re not reading them with the right inflection,” Roman muses, closing his own book and setting it down on the cushion beside him. Then he relaxes back against the sofa, patting his thigh and beckoning me with a lift of his chin. “Come here, wife.”

I grit my teeth against the urge to refuse. This is all part of the game, right? I’m playing a role; shifting my pieces around on the board until I can call checkmate. Every move is a means to an end.

At least that’s what I tell myself as I step between his spread knees and sink down to rest on his thigh. As always, he immediately shifts my position to his liking, his arm circling my waist and pulling me back against his hard chest. The heat of his body leeches into me, my breath hitching when he plucks the poetry book from my hands and begins flipping through the pages.

It’s not an arbitrary perusal; it’s noticeably intentional, as if he’s looking for a particular poem. When he finally lands on it, he clears his throat and begins to read the words aloud. His chest vibrates against my back as he speaks, the deep hum of his voice practically lulling me into a trance.

I've already read all the poems in this book, but hearing the words from Roman's tongue is a different experience entirely. The inflection he reads with breathes life into them, adding a flourish of color to the black and white print. I'm mesmerized.

A stab of disappointment spears through me as he reads the final words on the page, but then he begins flipping through the book again in search of another poem. The particularity with which he selects each one tells me that he's quite familiar with this book, and I'm not sure which is more surprising— that, or the way his fingers begin idly toying with the strands of my hair while he reads aloud, as if there's some modicum of affection between us.

I immediately dismiss that ridiculous notion, reminding myself of all the reasons I despise this self-righteous prick. Still, it's strange to have a moment like this with him, when he's being tender.

In moments like this, I wonder if I could grow to love him.

I startle at the sound of scratching against the back door, jerking my head up in alarm to see two pairs of warm brown eyes peering in at me through the pane of glass. It's drizzling outside, and I've been liberal lately about inviting the dogs in to take refuge from the weather. I turn to look at Roman pleadingly, those emerald eyes locking with mine.

He dips his chin in a nod. "You can let them in."

I spring up from Roman's lap eagerly, my bare feet padding against the tile as I cross the study to open the door for Vesper and Nox. The two of them trot in happily and I drop down to a crouch and ruffle their fur, greeting them like I always do before rising back to my full height. When I swivel back around, I find Roman watching me intently, rubbing a hand over his chin in quiet contemplation.

I hate that I never know what he's thinking, and I hate how much I want to know. I'd never ask, though. Maybe I'm better off not knowing.

The dogs advance further into the room, curling up by the fire for warmth, and for some inexplicable reason I return to my husband, climbing back on his lap of my own volition. He settles me against his chest and begins reading from the poetry book again, the deep octave of his voice lulling me into a trance once more. I don't even flinch when he slips a hand inside my robe and slides it up underneath my shirt, massaging my breast as beautiful words flow from his lips.

"Have you ever been in love?" I wonder aloud when he reaches the end of a particularly sappy poem.

Roman suddenly snaps the book closed, a frown creasing his brow. "No."

I sit up, twisting to face him. "But you were married before."

"I was."

"And you didn't love her?"

"Men like me don't love, Eliza. You should know that, growing up in this world. Love has no place in it."

"Then why even get married?" I scoff.

He slips his hand out from underneath my shirt, setting the poetry book aside. "You already know the answer to that."

"Alliances."

He dips his chin in a faint nod.

“Why bother with me, then?” I question. “Our fathers were already on friendly terms.”

Roman lifts a hand to tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “Maybe I just enjoy collecting beautiful things,” he muses.

My pulse skips and I avert my gaze, an unwitting blush rising to my cheeks. It’s fucked up to take his reassertion of ownership over me as a compliment, but I do, and in turn I foolishly drop my guard.

“I think my father truly loved my mother,” I say, picking at the scabs on my heart. “He was different before the accident. Kinder. After, he couldn’t bear to look at anything that reminded him of her, so he packed it all away. Her art, her things, even our family pictures... as if it was easier for him to just pretend she never existed at all than to acknowledge she was gone. Unfortunately, I was the only reminder he couldn’t get rid of.”

I glance up at Roman again, my lips curving in a brittle smile. “Until now, of course, when it benefitted him,” I bite out. “I’ve heard he’s always had impeccable business acumen.”

“He seems to think so,” my husband muses. “Though in my experience, confidence often begets carelessness.”

I wrinkle my nose, squinting at him. “Meaning?”

His demeanor shifts on a dime, his expression shuttering as he blows out an irritated breath. “Nothing for you to be concerned about, wife ,” he replies dismissively, tapping my butt in a signal for me to rise from his lap.

Frustration simmers beneath my veins as I push up to my feet, hating that I allowed him to trick me into being vulnerable again while getting nothing from him in return. His wickedly handsome features are schooled in a stoic mask as he plucks both books up off the sofa and rises to stand across from me, tucking his novel under an arm and extending the poetry book in my direction.

“You’re right,” I rasp bitterly, glancing down at the cover, then back up at him. “Love has no place in this world.”

I pivot on a heel and march out of the study, leaving Roman, the book of sappy love poems, and the hope of this marriage being anything but a farce behind.

21

Whoever said you can't teach an old dog new tricks never trapped that bitch at Volkov manor. It's amazing how many skills you can acquire when your very survival depends on it. I've already earned my acting chops, and now I'm adding espionage to my resume. My husband clearly has no intentions of opening up to me and sharing his secrets, so naturally, I've resorted to spying on him instead.

I've lost count of how many times I've passed by his office today. Back and forth, I've come up with mundane excuses to traverse the corridor, listening intently for voices from inside on each pass.

Something about a business deal in Chicago.

Another problem with some sort of shipment and seeking help from The Five.

A decades-old forgery in a death certificate.

The thick wool socks I'm wearing mute my pacing steps against the dark marble flooring, and I've dared to pause outside the door to listen in on a few of his conversations. Lucky for me, he has a habit of taking his calls on speaker. Nothing I've overheard thus far is particularly useful on its own, but the more I pick up on, the more ammo I'll have in my arsenal once I'm able to piece it all together.

Roman's office has been suspiciously quiet during my last three trips past the door. I briefly consider that he's caught onto my game, but I risk another pass nonetheless, not content to give up on my quest for information to leverage. It's a good thing I do—

not only is my husband on another call as I creep past his office, but I actually recognize the voice on the other end.

“And you’re sure you want to pursue this?” Magnus’ distinctly gruff voice questions. “If there’s truth in it, there will be dire consequences for all involved, including your new wife. The power vacuum it would create...”

“I’m aware, father,” Roman interrupts sharply. “Which is why I’ll continue to remain two steps ahead.”

Goosebumps prick up on my skin at his harsh tone, apprehension curling in my gut at the mention of me. I have no idea what Roman’s up to, but it sounds dangerous. It sounds like exactly the kind of collateral I’ve been searching for.

“Then I’ll see you both tonight,” Magnus states.

“We’ll be there,” Roman replies curtly.

My pulse picks up speed, excitement rippling through me at the prospect of getting off the estate for the evening. He hasn’t taken me anywhere since that business dinner with Anton weeks ago, and I was so preoccupied with loathing my new husband at the time that I didn’t bother paying any attention to what the men discussed. Wherever we’re going tonight, I’ll be listening to and soaking in every detail.

So many thoughts are racing through my mind that I don’t even realize Roman has ended the call— not until I hear the clip of his shoes against the floor approaching the opposite side of the door. I immediately spin around and scurry off down the corridor, my heart in my throat.

“Nox!” Roman calls out as the office door bursts open.

My stomach swoops, socks sliding against the slick marble underfoot as I skid to a stop. I let the dogs back outside an hour ago— they tend to follow me around when they're in the house, and the tap of their toenails against the floor wasn't conducive to my stealthy spying— but before I did, there were a few times they wandered off on their own. One of which I distinctly remember Roman shoos them out of his office.

There are very few things I'll put myself in the direct line of fire for, but the dogs are at the top of that list.

I spin back around and brace myself as Roman storms out into the hall, prepared to endure his wrath if it means sparing my furry companions. Odds are fifty-fifty as to whether it's an act of bravery or blind stupidity. Probably the latter.

My husband stops in his tracks when our eyes meet, the subtle lift of his brows betraying his surprise at finding me lurking outside his office. "Eliza," he breathes, quickly schooling his expression back into a blank, impenetrable mask. "Don't you typically spend your afternoons in the garden?"

So he's been spying on me , too.

Duly noted.

"What'd he do?" I ask hesitantly, clasping my hands together in front of me to conceal their nervous tremble.

Roman's brows pinch inward, a little crease forming between them. "Who?"

"Nox," I reply hoarsely. "I already let him back outside, but if he made a mess, I can clean it up. Just... please don't hurt him."

Roman stares at me for a long moment, those green eyes burning into mine as the

muscle in his tightly-clenched jaw feathers. “I’d never hurt my dogs,” he grits out, as if I’ve offended him by suggesting he might. “And I won’t have my wife scrubbing the floors like an employee.”

I advance in his direction, not trusting him as far as I can throw him. “Just let me...”

He holds up a hand to halt my advance. “Clara will take care of it,” he snaps.

I shrink back, swallowing thickly. So much for bravery.

“O-okay,” I stammer, head bobbing in a feeble nod. “I’ll just go start getting ready for dinner, then.”

“No need, I won’t be dining with you tonight,” Roman murmurs absently, gaze flickering down as he re-buttons the cuffs of his shirt. “I have to go into the city for business.”

“Alone?” I blurt.

His eyes ping back up to mine, narrowing suspiciously. “If you must know, Niko will be accompanying me.”

“Oh,” I breathe, heat rising to my cheeks.

He arches a dark brow. “Were you expecting something else?”

“N-no,” I rush out, mentally berating myself for my slip-up. Now he’s onto me, and he’s obviously trying to bait me into admitting I overheard something I shouldn’t have. “I just don’t like being here alone at night,” I say with an innocent tilt of my head, batting my lashes to really play it up. “It’s creepy.”

“Well, you won’t have to worry about that,” he replies flatly. “Clara will be staying the night to make sure you don’t get into any mischief while I’m gone, like last time.” Roman gives me a pointed look and I turn away to hide the unwitting blush that rises to my cheeks, memories of last time filtering through my brain.

He ordered me to my knees. He made me crawl. He used my body for his own pleasure and left me desperately unfulfilled.

“I won’t be returning until morning, and the manor will be on lockdown while I’m away,” he adds, yanking me out of the filthy scene replaying in my mind and back to the present.

“Lockdown?” I repeat, a cold sense of unease washing over me. “Is everything okay?”

Roman waves a hand dismissively. “Just a precaution, nothing for you to worry about. The doors are to remain locked until I return, and I’ll be calling in a security team I’ve worked with in the past. They’re very discreet and keep to the perimeter of the estate, so you won’t even know they’re here. I’ll likely be keeping them on for the foreseeable future.”

My heart pounds against my ribcage, a prickly feeling of foreboding creeping up my spine.

I thought the monster inside the manor was dangerous, but if a man as intimidating as my husband is bolstering his security, whatever threat he’s facing must be even more terrifying.

I may despise Roman, but do I actually wish death upon him?

“Okay, I’ll be sure to stay inside and keep the doors locked,” I reply, forcing a brittle

smile to my lips. “Be safe in the city.”

He grunts in affirmation, turning on a heel and striding back into his office, dismissive as always. You’d think that if he’s put the manor in some sort of danger, he’d at least keep his roommate a little better informed. I shouldn’t bother being concerned for his mortality when he clearly doesn’t give a damn about mine.

I don’t wait around in hopes that he’ll have a sudden change of heart and spill his secrets. Instead, I head outside while I still can and track down the dogs, intent on bringing them back in. If I’m to be locked up tonight, they’re much better company than stone cold Clara .

Sleep doesn’t come easily with Roman away from the manor. Despite sneaking the dogs into bed, I can’t manage to relax and quiet my anxious mind. I toss and turn, startling at every creak and groan of the house settling. I struggle to recall what Magnus said over the phone, wondering where my husband is and whether he’s in danger.

It’s not that I particularly care about Roman Volkov’s wellbeing. I’m connected to him— for better or worse— so a target on his back is also one on mine. Any danger to him is a danger to me. That’s the only reason I care.

Or at least that’s what I keep telling myself.

I do finally manage to drift off to sleep at some point, but I wake with a start when Nox suddenly perks up beside me, a growl rumbling in his chest as he stares into the inky darkness beyond my bed. Vesper lifts his head from his spot at the foot of the bed, looking in the same direction as his brother. I hold my breath as I focus my own eyes on the shadow lurking across the room, the icy claws of fear wrapping around my throat.

This isn't real. Go back to sleep, Eliza.

The shadow moves. Draws closer. The floorboards creak as it continues its advance, then a sliver of moonlight shining in through a gap in the curtains illuminates the sharp lines of Roman's face.

It's not the shadow.

It's my husband.

Both seem intent on haunting me.

I press a palm against my pounding heart, all the air whooshing from my lungs in a relieved sigh. Ordinarily, his presence is anything but comforting, but between the specter that haunts my room at night and the unknown danger that warranted the manor going on lockdown, Roman is the lesser evil right now.

Better the devil you know than the one you don't.

Vesper wags his stubby little tail in recognition, but Nox still has his hackles raised, growling as Roman makes his way closer.

"Idti," he murmurs with a snap of his fingers, commanding the dogs to leave in Russian. They instantly comply with his directive, jumping down from the bed and trotting toward the door.

Worst guard dogs ever.

"What are you doing here?" I gasp as he closes the door behind them, sealing the two of us alone inside my bedroom.

He begins prowling toward me again with a sinister gleam in his eye that alerts me to the presence of Mr. Hyde. “I was able to return sooner than expected.”

“No,” I huff, punching my fists against the mattress and pushing myself upright. “What are you doing here , in my room?”

“Fucking my wife, in a minute,” he replies bluntly as he approaches the side of the bed and begins unbuttoning his dress shirt.

I open my mouth to protest, but it’s just left hanging agape as Roman undoes the final buttons and shrugs off his shirt, giving me an eyeful of all that mouthwatering, hard-earned muscle beneath. My mind blanks out, a traitorous throb starting up between my thighs as he drops his hands to his belt and unfastens the buckle.

On second thought, I could do with some stress relief...

“Take your clothes off, pet,” Roman growls as he drops his slacks to the floor.

I don’t move a muscle, still captivated by the strip show playing out before my eyes.

He pauses as he tucks his thumbs into the waistband of his boxer briefs, cocking a dark brow at me. “Or would you prefer I rip them off?”

I huff out an annoyed breath, my eyes pinging up to glare into his defiantly. My first instinct is always to push back against him. Each time, I have to remind myself that my compliance is only a means to an end. I’m not giving into his whims, I’m playing a role, and I’m playing it well.

Maybe too well. It’s getting harder to keep track of what’s real and what isn’t, but I suppose it doesn’t matter much right now. In this moment, I can’t focus on anything but the searing heat coursing through my veins.

Roman hasn't fucked me in days. I need it, and it'd be a pointless exercise in masochism to resist him.

Averting my gaze in shame, I bury myself further beneath the covers, slipping off my little silk pajama set before rolling onto my side and putting my back to him. My heart pounds with anticipation as he throws back the comforter, the mattress dipping beneath his weight as he climbs into bed and settles beside me.

"You shouldn't sneak around in the dark like that," I grumble as he bands an arm around my waist and yanks my body backwards into his. The soft curves of my bare flesh meet his hard lines, the warmth of his chest bleeding into my back. "You scared me."

"Then I'll bet you're dripping," he murmurs, scraping his teeth against my shoulder as he reaches down to rub his velvety tip through my slick folds.

He's not wrong.

"Roman," I protest, even as I shift my hips to give him better access.

He brings his other hand up to collar my throat, cutting off my air as he aligns with my entrance and thrusts into me from behind. My back arches, lungs seizing for breath as he stretches and fills me, a low groan rumbling in his chest.

"Fuck, I've missed your tight cunt," he snarls as he pushes in deeper, burying himself to the hilt.

I claw at the hand suffocating my throat, black spots dotting the edges of my vision. He lingers there for a moment, my inner walls straining around his girth and my lungs screaming for oxygen. Then his grip around my neck slowly slackens, allowing me to draw a much-needed breath as he begins moving inside me, owning my body with

every harsh snap of his hips.

Pleasure spreads through my limbs like wildfire as Roman hammers into me with reckless abandon, his hand sliding away from my throat to grope my breasts. He squeezes one roughly in his palm, eliciting a moan from deep in my chest when he pinches my hardened nipple between his fingers and twists. The sensation shoots straight to my core, my body jolting, toes curling.

When he lets go, I instinctively reach up to rub at my stinging nipple, my fingers sliding against something warm and sticky coating my skin. Shoving the comforter away, I glance down in alarm, eyes widening at the sight of dark red smears contrasting against my pale flesh.

“Are you bleeding?” I choke.

Roman pauses his thrusts, lifting his hand away from my body. “Guess I am,” he murmurs as he moves it into the light, hooking his chin over my shoulder to examine the deep gash cut up the center of his palm. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“What happened?”

“Broke a glass earlier.”

“Shouldn’t you get a bandage or something?”

“And leave this perfect pussy?” he scoffs as he punches his hips forward again, stealing my breath while burying himself impossibly deeper. “I don’t think so, pet.”

My eyes roll back as he resumes his savage thrusting, his hand slapping back down over my breast and giving it a rough squeeze. Now that I know he’s bleeding, I can feel the warmth of it pooling against my skin, my stomach curling in on itself.

“Roman, you’re bleeding on me,” I grit out, shoving his hand away.

He pulls out with an annoyed grunt, tossing the comforter aside and flipping me onto my back. Pushing up to kneel between my thighs, he rakes his heated gaze over my chest, emerald eyes glimmering with twisted delight at the bloodstains on my skin.

“Look how beautiful you are, covered in red,” he murmurs reverently, reaching down to smear more of it across my breasts.

I dip my chin, eyes tracking the movement of his hand and the crimson streaks on my flesh. I’m not sure why I don’t stop him. Sick fascination takes hold as he paints me with his blood, nudging my thighs further apart and sinking his thick cock back inside me. I clench around him, crying out as he starts pounding me into the mattress, both of us caught up in some sadistic haze of blood and indulgence, pain and rapture.

I come so hard that I black out, and the burgeoning monster inside me welcomes the darkness with open arms.

22

The ceramic coffee mug warms my hands as I wrap them tighter around it, leaning my elbows against the stone railing of the balcony outside my bedroom. The chilly air bites at my skin through the loose knit of my sweater, the skies over the estate gloomy and gray. A fitting backdrop for my mood.

Roman's leaving again. The black town car is idling in the circle drive, Andrew waiting behind the wheel to take my husband into the city. Meetings, Clara said. He's expected back by dinner time, and I've been instructed to wear black for our meal.

Guess Mr. Hyde got what he needed from me last night.

Despite the way he fucked me into a coma, morning still came far too soon. I only got a few hours of sleep in before I woke up alone in my bed to Clara rudely throwing open the curtains, drowning the room in light until I had no choice but to get up. I'm now on my fifth cup of coffee and no less tired.

The sound of the front door slamming echoes across the lawn, followed by Roman's heavy footsteps as he strides from the house toward the car. He's impeccably groomed as always, dressed in a well-tailored suit—black, like his soul—and a shiny pair of oxfords that I distinctly remember Nox puking on. Aw, I've got memories of my husband that make me smile after all.

He pauses as he reaches for the door handle of the car, craning his neck to glance back at me over his shoulder. My breath catches when those evergreen eyes lock with

mine, my fingers tightening around my mug. It's annoying how a single look from him still elicits a knee-jerk reaction. He dips his chin in a nod of acknowledgement, and I lift mine in return. Then he turns away and opens the car door, ducking inside.

I flinch at the thud of it closing behind him, gravel crunching beneath the tires of the town car as it starts to pull away. A smile comes to my lips as I linger on the balcony and watch it disappear down the long driveway, finishing off the rest of my coffee before heading back inside.

This is the exact opportunity I've been waiting for. Roman is away for the day, and Clara is busy downstairs with her daily chores. There's nobody around to stop me from finally seeing if that key I lifted from Roman's bedroom fits in the lock of the tower door.

Abandoning my empty coffee mug on the breakfast table, I step into my walk-in closet and pace to the back where I hid my cardigan, hoping like hell it'll still be there. I swear I don't even breathe until I shove the heavy black peacoat aside and find it hanging right where I left it. My pulse picks up speed as I reach into the pocket, my fingertips brushing the glossy finish of the photograph before landing on the cold metal of the key. I'm not ready to look at the picture again yet. Giving the shadow a face has only made its presence in my room at night all the more disturbing.

Clutching the key tightly in my fist, I rush back out of the closet, stopping over at my desk for a notebook and pen. This time, I'm going up to the tower prepared. If the key unlocks the door, I'll be using whatever time I have up there to sketch out the hedge maze in hopes of solving it.

Even though I know I'm alone on the second floor of the manor, I still get that creepy feeling of being watched as I slip out of my room and tiptoe down the hall. The silence is deafening, every creak of the floorboards beneath my sock-clad feet setting my teeth on edge. The last room on the left is noticeably colder when I step inside,

and I find myself darting my gaze back and forth the entire way to the arched door at the rear, half expecting some disembodied ghoul to be lurking in the corner.

My hand trembles as I lift the heavy iron key, fitting it in the lock and holding my breath as I twist. A heavy clicking sound echoes as the lock turns over, and I turn the knob with my other hand and push at the door, exhaling in relief when it stutters open with a groan.

The creepy stone stairwell beckons me to ascend, pale light filtering in through the stained-glass window halfway up. No turning back now. My pulse thunders as I begin my climb, trailing my fingertips along the frigid wall for balance as I follow the twisting stairs up to the door at the top. Like last time, it's unlocked, and I push inside to find the circular room just as it was before— cold and barren.

The window still hasn't been replaced, chilly air whistling in from between the gaps in the planks boarding it up. This plan would be a whole lot easier with an actual window to look through, but I was able to see well enough through the cracks last time to discern that the hedges formed a maze. Hopefully that means I'll also be able to see well enough to map it out.

Crossing the room, I push up on my tiptoes and squint to peer out from the largest gap between the boards. It's not an ideal vantage point, but at least I can view a strip of the maze at a time if I keep my feet steady and my focus sharp. After taking a moment to consider my action plan, I pull the notebook and pen from the pocket of my sweater and get to work sketching it out.

It isn't long before I realize what an impossible task this is with my vision so horribly obstructed. The greenery of the maze all blends together, so I have to triple-check every stroke of my pen. It'll take me days to sketch out the whole thing at this rate, and I've already had to wait a week for this chance at exploring the tower. Who knows if I'll survive another one?

Rather than allowing this failure to crush my ambition, I immediately begin thinking of possible ways to solve the problem. Roman only just left, after all. I've got time to figure this out before he returns. Within minutes, a new approach begins to take shape in my mind.

With a burst of renewed energy, I scurry down from the tower, changing course and heading outside. The dogs are nowhere in sight as I cross the lawn, and for once I'm glad they aren't around. They'd only distract me. Right now, I need to stay focused if I'm going to pull this off.

Keeping a lookout for Lev, I stride determinedly in the direction of the garden shed, intending to get my hands on a tool to pry a board loose from the tower window. There's nobody in sight as I approach the small building, and when I test the door handle, I find it unlocked. Must be my lucky day.

The rusty hinges creak in protest as I push the door open, my eyes widening when I get a look at the cluttered mess of junk jammed inside the small shed. There's bound to be something in here I can use.

"Jackpot," I hiss under my breath, ducking in and pulling the door closed behind me. A single bulb hangs from a cord attached to the ceiling, but there isn't any readily apparent way to switch it on. The only other source of light in the shed is a small, dingy window at the rear, and the visibility it provides leaves a lot to be desired. Not ideal, but I'll just have to make it work.

After giving my eyes a minute or so to adjust, I begin scanning the shelves and surfaces on the interior of the shed, carefully stepping over the equipment strewn on the floor as I venture further in. Honestly, I'm not really sure what I'm even searching for, but I feel like I'll know when I find it.

As I near the back of the shed, I spot a hammer resting upon a small workbench, a

giddy wave of titillation rushing through me as I lean over to snatch it up. Of course, the moment I do, the door to the shed creaks open behind me.

“Can I help you with something, Mrs. Volkov?”

I startle at the sound of Lev’s voice, the hammer slipping from my grip as I whip around in alarm. It clatters to the floor and I jump away to avoid it hitting my feet, tripping over the wheel of a lawnmower in the process. My body pitches forward, but as ancient as he is, Lev has surprisingly good reflexes. He manages to lunge and catch me by the arm before I go down, righting me with an amused chuckle. He’s stronger than he looks, too.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you,” he says apologetically, letting go of my arm once I’m steady on my feet.

“No, no, you’re fine,” I breathe, smoothing my hair back and fighting to regain my composure.

Lev cocks his head as he appraises me. “Whatcha doin’ in here?” he asks curiously.

“Uh, I was looking for you, actually,” I lie, shocked at how easily it rolls off my tongue. I suppose everything gets easier with practice. “I was hoping you could point me to the gardening shears?” I ask with a hopeful smile, pretending I don’t see them hanging on the wall right over his left shoulder.

“Shears?” he repeats, his bushy gray brows pinching together. “For what?”

“I was going to clip the last of the dahlias,” I explain, piecing together this excuse remarkably fast. “Clara mentioned there’s a cold front coming, so I figured I’d bring some inside so I could enjoy them a little longer.”

Lev's eyes crinkle at the corners with his responding grin. "I can do that for you, ma'am," he offers readily. "I'll bring some flowers in to Clara..."

"I'd like to do it myself," I interrupt, a little too forcefully.

His smile slowly fades, brows knitting together in concern. "Okay, no problem," he murmurs, darting his gaze back and forth shiftily. "I'll just have to dig out the shears. If you come back tomorrow, I can help you with whatever you need."

I flicker a glance at the large pair of gardening shears hanging on the wall right behind him, my stomach sinking. He means he'll help me with whatever Roman gives him permission to. Like Clara, Lev's loyalty will always be to my husband.

"Sure, that sounds good," I agree, flashing him a sugar-sweet, fake-as-fuck smile. "Thanks, Lev. You're the best."

"Anything for you, Mrs. Volkov," he drawls with a blush. Stepping aside, he gestures to the open door, and I give him a polite nod as I shuffle past him to leave the shed.

So much for my master plan with the tower. There's no point in going back up there to scout an escape route if I can't see worth a damn, so unless Lev miraculously decides to call it quits for the day and head home, this whole mission is a bust.

It's hard not to give up and sink into hopelessness when nothing ever seems to work out in my favor. Dragging my feet in resigned defeat, I glare at the hedge maze as I make my way around the side of the manor, wishing I could just burn the damn thing to the ground. Pretty sure I saw a gas can or two in the shed.

Getting lost amongst the shrubbery actually doesn't sound like the worst idea right now. I've still got my notepad with me, so I could try to map the maze from the inside...

I wander toward the entrance as I consider my options, changing my mind at the last second when I look past the hedges to the little cemetery plot situated at the edge of the forest. I've mostly avoided going near it, but right now it's as if the graveyard is calling out to me like a macabre siren song, renewed curiosity drawing me in.

From the moment I step foot in the cemetery, I get the distinct feeling I'm being watched. Unease prickles at the back of my neck as I stroll the rows of dilapidated gravestones, eyes eagerly combing over the names and dates inscribed upon them. Some are so old that they've become illegible, but my husband's ancient relatives are of little consequence to me. I'm looking for the more recent casualties of Volkov manor. I'm looking for the one everybody refuses to talk about.

Turning down the last row and slinking past the mausoleum, my stomach bottoms out when I spot a grave that looks out of place amongst the rest, far too fresh to be passed off as anything but recent. My palms instantly turn clammy, my heart leaping into my throat. Even without a headstone, I have a gut feeling that I know who's buried beneath the soil.

She looked like me, and we go by the same name here at the manor.

Mrs. Volkov.

Roman and I have barely spoken to one another since he returned to the manor last night, but he never seems to run out of things to talk about with Niko. The two of them have been holed up in his office for the better part of an hour now, and I've again turned to espionage.

I'm forced to change up my tactics this time since the office door is slightly ajar. Pacing the hall would be far too conspicuous, so instead I've been sneaking up to eavesdrop at regular intervals, then rushing back to the study to jot things down in my notepad. Hopefully when I look it over later, I'll be able to piece some things together and make sense of it.

This is definitely an exercise in patience. Each time I've approached the office door, I've tiptoed over slowly, barely even breathing. I'm careful not to make a single sound as I shuffle closer to the edge of the doorframe, straining my ears to hear the men's hushed voices from inside.

"How far back does this go?" Niko questions.

"That's what I intend to find out," Roman replies in a low growl. He sounds agitated. "There's no denying the connection, though, especially in light of this..." his voice trails off, followed by the distinctive sound of rustling paper. He must be showing Niko a document of some sort. A brief silence falls as his second-in-command evidently looks it over.

"Shit," Niko hisses, the sharp edge in his tone conveying his shock at whatever he's

viewing.

Curiosity gets the best of me. Cautious not to make a sound, I lean forward to peer through the gap in the door, determined to sneak a peek at whatever elicited that reaction from Niko. He's seated across from Roman's desk with a sheet of paper in his hands, my husband fiddling with the frayed edge of the bandage around his own as he watches him skim the document. It obviously contains something important, but no matter how much I squint, the text on the page is too small for me to make out.

Guess I'll just have to hope one of them verbalizes what's on that paper.

I slowly start to back away from the gap in the door when Roman's gaze suddenly lifts. My heart stutters in my chest and I jerk out of sight, pressing my back against the wall and clasping hand over my mouth to muffle my panicked breathing.

Maybe he didn't see me...

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to cut this short, Niko," Roman states flatly. "Something has come up."

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

My thick socks slide against the black marble flooring as I scramble down the corridor away from his office, anxiety suffocating my throat like a noose. I need to come up with a plausible explanation fast if I'm going to get myself out of this one. If I run and hide, it's as good as an admission of guilt. It'd only confirm that I've been plotting against my husband, and I have no doubt that he'd lock me up and throw away the key.

I need an excuse, and I need it now .

I'm in such a state of panic that it's as if my brain isn't even working. I'm no closer to forming a cover story when I dart into the study, the men's voices carrying down the hall as they exit Roman's office. I'd better just run and hide. Remembering the secret door in the bookcase, I dash in that direction, but just as I'm about to reach for the shelf to pull it wide, a lightbulb goes off in my head.

This house of horrors could be my salvation.

I've lost count of how many times I've caught a flicker of movement in my periphery only to turn and find nothing there. The manor is most definitely haunted, and its ghosts just became my alibi.

I draw a deep breath, shoring up my composure and willing my frantic pulse to slow. This could work. The glimpse Roman got of me could only have been for a millisecond. He'll be expecting me to run. When he comes in here and finds me acting completely natural, it'll take him by such surprise that he'll question whether he saw me at all. Shit, for a spur-of-the-moment plan, It's kind of brilliant.

Concentrating on getting my breathing under control, I reach for a book on the shelf, flipping it open right as Roman and Niko enter the study. I'm the picture of nonchalance as I glance over at them, both men turning their heads to look in my direction simultaneously.

I swear Roman falters a step.

"See you later, Mrs. Volkov," Niko calls out, flashing me a grin.

I smile back at him shyly as I lift a hand, wiggling my fingers in a little wave.

“I’ll call you,” Roman grumbles to Niko while I turn back to the bookshelves and pretend to peruse the titles.

I hear the door close behind Niko as I return the random book I’d grabbed to its rightful place. Then I hear Roman’s heavy footsteps crossing the room toward me as I run my fingers along the aged spines, fully committed to the part I’m playing of a bored housewife searching for something interesting to read.

Pain shoots through my scalp as Roman snatches a handful of my hair, yanking me backwards forcefully and spinning us both around. Before I can even react, he shoves me down over the side of the sofa, my body folding over the arm and my cheek smacking against the leather cushion.

“Are you spying on me, wife ?” he snarls.

“What? N-no,” I choke.

“Don’t lie to me,” he snaps, his fingers tightening in the strands of my hair until my eyes water.

I grit my teeth against the pain, struggling to break free of his hold. “I’m not!”

He folds his body over mine, pinning me tighter to the arm of the sofa. “ Liar ,” he whispers into the shell of my ear, his warm breath skating across my cheek. “You’ve got five seconds to come clean before I reach the end of my patience, Eliza. Five .”

My heart slams against my ribs.

“ Four .”

I cry out in frustration, bucking against him.

“ Three .”

Panic sets in.

“ Two .”

“I’m scared, okay?!” I shout, my voice so shrill that it doesn’t even sound like my own. “You put the manor on lockdown, but you haven’t told me a thing about what’s going on! What do you expect me to do, just wait for something to come crashing through the front door?”

“You think I can’t keep my own wife safe?” he growls.

“ Can you?” I scoff, trying and failing to buck him off me. “What happened to your last wife, Roman?”

He glares down at me, something positively chilling lurking in those green eyes. “She forgot her place,” he replies coldly. “And it seems you’ve done the same.”

My heart trips over its valves, my blood running cold.

I knew it.

“Let go of me!” I shout, kicking and thrashing against him.

“No,” he replies callously, wrenching my head back so I’m forced to meet his soulless eyes. “You are mine, Eliza. Mine. I own you, and that means I can do whatever I like with you.”

“Fuck you!” I spit, any sense of self-preservation flying out the window as years of repressed rage and resentment surge to the surface. “You don’t own me, nobody

fucking owns me!”

Roman chuckles under his breath, a cruel smile coming to his lips. “Wanna bet?”

Keeping me pinned with the weight of his body, he unfastens his belt, sliding it from the loops. I spit and curse as he wrenches my arms behind my back and wraps the leather tightly around my wrists, binding them together at the base of my spine while I spew venom at him. None of it fazes the devil I married. He proceeds to push my sweater up my waist and yank my leggings down, my panties coming with them. Gripping my hips, he kicks my legs apart, lines up, and shoves into me from behind.

A scream tears from my throat as pain splinters between my thighs, rippling through me as my husband asserts his possession with deep, forceful thrusts. He drags me backwards to meet every one of them, his fingertips digging bruises into my hips as he drills his savage claim into me.

“Who owns you, wife?” he grits out, the smack of his pelvis against my ass reverberating through the room like depraved applause.

“Fuck you,” I hiss, even as the pain slowly gives way to pleasure, the friction of my clit against the arm of the sofa building with every hard punch of his hips. I can’t contain my breathy moan as my climax builds, hating the way my body reacts to his debasement. Right when my release is in reach, Roman abruptly pulls out like the sadistic bastard he is, sliding the tip of his cock up to notch against my rear hole instead. I yelp, my body instantly tensing in apprehension.

“Wrong answer,” Roman murmurs as he pushes against the tight ring of muscle, landing a hard slap on my ass cheek that makes my body jolt. “Who owns you, Eliza?”

I gasp as he forces the head of his cock past my resistance, gritting my teeth against

the burning stretch. Still, I don't give him the response he's seeking. I won't.

The pain only intensifies as he works his thick cock in deeper, a feral groan vibrating from his throat at the tight fit. I sink my teeth into my quivering lower lip to stifle a whimper, tears springing to my eyes.

Fuck , it hurts .

I choke on a stilted inhale as Roman starts pulsing his hips, fucking my ass in shallow thrusts, pushing in further with each one. When he's fully seated, he grabs a fistful of my hair, my back arching as he yanks my head back and ups his pace, not giving me nearly enough time to adjust to the foreign sensation. A broken cry falls from my lips, tears freely flowing down my cheeks.

Like always, my pain only fuels him, his thrusts turning wild. At this point I'm not sure if I'm crying because it hurts or because it feels good— the ache is somehow starting to blur into rapture, overwhelming my senses as my mind goes gloriously blank. It isn't long before I'm hurtling toward a soul-sucking climax, and the only thing left to do is let go.

My muscles seize as my orgasm rockets through me, Roman cursing as I clench around him. With a final buck of his hips, he floods my ass with the heat of his release, squeezing my cheeks roughly as he empties inside me. Then he pulls out and I collapse limply over the arm of the sofa, shuddering a sob.

I'm breathless. Numb. Violated. Empty.

"Who owns you?" he asks again in a low, gravelly tone.

"You," I whisper defeatedly.

“That’s right, wife ,” Roman murmurs in satisfaction. “I own every inch of you.” He tucks his dick away and zips his slacks, then steps up beside the couch and looks down his nose at me, his cruel expression devoid of compassion. “Remember that the next time you think about crossing me.”

24

I was never a very good student. Until the age of nine, I attended a fancy private school that boasted an exceptional curriculum, but I was lucky to squeak by with passing grades. After my mom died, my father pulled me out of school in the name of safety and paid a fortune for a private tutor who had no better luck in turning me studious. Mrs. Garrison said I was lucky I was pretty because marrying well would be the only way I'd get ahead in life. I put salt in her coffee.

I haven't done a research project in a while and never particularly enjoyed them, but perhaps I was just never truly invested in the subject matter. This one has my full attention. Mrs. Garrison would be proud at the effort I'm putting in to test my theory against the information, and with any luck, I'll have some answers soon. Still, fuck her .

The sheer size of the manor's library is intimidating. I spend a full hour in there picking through the educational texts until I finally find some that are on point, and my biceps burn under the effort of hauling them upstairs to my bedroom. Now I'm settled in on my bed with a full stack of books behind me, poring through the text in search of a psychological diagnosis to explain my husband's split personality.

The first book I tried to skim through was a bust, full of medical jargon that was impossible to follow. In this second one, though, I think I've just stumbled upon my answer in record time. I'm learning all about Dissociative Identity Disorder— a chronic mental illness that involves having multiple distinct identities within one person. Also known as multiple personality disorder.

The list of characteristics reads like a narrative of what I've endured while living with Roman Volkov. People with DID may experience emotional numbness or a sense of detachment. People with DID experience two or more distinct identities, each with their own mannerisms. An abrupt change in behavior typically signals the emergence of an alter.

My heart beats a riot in my chest as I continue to read, absorbing every drop of information like a sponge. I'm so focused that I startle when a knock suddenly comes at the door, reflexively slamming the book shut as it swings open.

Roman steps over the threshold, his evergreen eyes locking with mine before dropping to the book that I'm resting my palm on. I quickly snatch it up, turning at the waist to drop it on the top of the stack behind me. "What do you want?" I snap as I swivel back around, wincing at the pain in my butt as I shift my weight.

Probably not the best approach with someone who I've just confirmed is mentally ill, but it's hard to fake niceties when I'm reminded of how he punished me for spying every time I sit down.

Roman advances into my room, ignoring my obvious disdain at having him in here. "I have something for you," he states.

"No thanks," I scoff, folding my arms over my chest and jerking my gaze toward the windows.

"Eliza," he growls.

Curiosity wins out and I turn back to look at him, my breath catching when I see what he's holding up.

Tears well in my eyes instantly at the sight of my mother's Givenchy bag. I'd given

up hope of ever seeing it again.

He crosses the room in a quick stride and drops down on the edge of the bed, extending the purse toward me in offering. I instantly snatch it out of his grip, hugging it to my chest as if it's my mom herself.

"Thank you," I whisper, peering over at him through my eyelashes. As much as I hate being vulnerable with Roman, there's no hiding what this bag means to me. "It's the only thing I have left of my mother."

He stares back at me, his jaw set tight. "I imagine that'd be difficult, not to have anything to feel connected to her," he murmurs. "When my own mother passed, my father made the house a shrine to her. There's still a lot of Daria Volkov left here in the manor." He glances around, the ghost of a smile coming to his lips. "She chose the art for this room."

I follow his gaze, my eyes flitting over the stunning pastel landscapes, then coming back to his. "When did she die?" I ask sympathetically.

"When I was born. Trouble in labor."

"I'm sorry," I whisper, struck by a sudden sense of sympathy for the devil. "It's awful that you never got the chance to know her."

"But I did, through what she left behind," he muses, sweeping another glance around the room. "Her art, her books. That poetry book you called 'sappy' was her favorite, actually."

I wince, a flush of embarrassment heating my cheeks.

Strange, I never even considered to ask whether Roman's mother was dead or alive.

You'd think that'd be the kind of thing that would come up in conversation when you're married to someone, but I suppose normalcy has never applied to this union.

Daria Volkov. Now I remember seeing that name on one of the headstones in the cemetery.

"That's life, though," Roman murmurs absently. "It always ends in death, the only question is when."

I scrunch my nose. "That's a morbid way to look at it."

"No more morbid than your father erasing your mother from your lives," he replies, giving me a pointed look.

I heave a sigh, shaking my head. "People grieve differently, I guess. And they take out that grief in different ways."

"Your father took his out on you," Roman states, not posing it as a question because he clearly already knows the answer. It's obvious that there's no love lost between my father and I, considering how he traded me off to Roman without batting an eye.

I jerk a nod. "Like I said, he changed."

Roman narrows his eyes, studying me for a long moment. "He hurt you." Again, not a question.

I gnaw on my lower lip, wondering how him bringing me the Givenchy led to this ; a rare honest conversation with my husband that I suddenly have no interest in having. As important as that bag is to me, him procuring it doesn't make up for his assault in the study. It doesn't make up for the weeks of abuse I've endured at his hands.

“Eliza...”

“Thank you for the bag, Roman,” I bite out, my guard slamming back up. He’s fooled me before with tender moments, but they don’t make him any less of a monster. They don’t change my plans for escaping him. “As you can tell, it means a great deal to me, so I’m grateful that you brought it. But if you don’t mind, I’d like to be alone.”

His Adam’s apple bobs with a harsh swallow in response to my dismissive tone, lips turning down in a frown. I watch him intently, my pulse picking up speed at the prospect of seeing him switch to his alter ego right before my eyes. The book said there might be a physical sign, like a flinch or a prolonged blink. Mr. Hyde loves when I sass him.

Evidently he” not coming out to play, though. I’m not sure if it’s disappointment or relief that I feel when Roman dips his chin in a nod and pushes up to his feet, muttering, “I’ll see you at dinner.”

I press my lips together in a tight line, watching after him as he strides for the door. He steps through and closes it behind him without so much as a backwards glance, and I reach for the book I’d been reading and jump right back into my research project, smiling fondly every time my eyes land on the Givenchy tucked in my lap.

It isn't often that Roman's work stretches into the late hours of the evening. He was still in his office with Niko when I went upstairs to get ready for dinner, and upon coming down, Clara told me that our meal would be postponed until the men were finished. It's probably too much to hope that Niko will be asked to stay and dine with us, but I definitely wouldn't mind having some nice dinner conversation for a change.

The chime of the grandfather clock indicates that I've been lurking in the study for half an hour now, and I'm starting to get antsy. For a fleeting second, I actually consider trying my luck at spying again. The click of my heels against the floor would be a dead giveaway, though, so I quickly dismiss that notion and instead pour myself a glass of vodka to nurse while I wait.

It goes down a little too smooth, so I have a second. Then I hear the distinct sound of the office door opening down the hall, followed by the sound of footsteps approaching.

Niko strides into the study, his steps pausing when he notices me hovering by the bar cart.

"Good evening, Mrs. Volkov," he greets with a smile, his eyes wandering down my form in a quick once-over. "You look nice."

I suppose this is probably the first time he's seen me dressed up. Clara neglected to inform me of the color I'm meant to wear for dinner tonight, but I'm instantly grateful I chose this little black cocktail dress that shows off my body when Niko's

heated gaze drops again to admire it, as if he can't resist going in for a second peek.

"Thanks, you don't look half bad yourself," I reply as I appraise him, a blush rising to my cheeks. "Are you boys all done working?"

"We are, your husband's just finishing up on a call," Niko answers, stepping toward me as I begin gravitating in his direction. "Sorry for keeping you from dinner."

I wave a hand dismissively. "No trouble, I'm not even that hungry. Had a big lunch."

It's not even a lie; I ate every bite of the stroganoff Clara prepared. If she keeps making my favorites like she has been lately, I'm going to have trouble suppressing my appetite.

"Well then maybe I should apologize to your husband for keeping him from you," Niko muses, the corner of his mouth lifting in a playful smirk.

"He manages that just fine on his own," I mumble.

Niko shrugs a shoulder. "He's a busy man."

"Too busy for his wife, it seems," I sigh, the vodka coursing through my bloodstream loosening my lips. The taste of it is still on them when I wet them with my tongue, my heels clicking against the marble tile underfoot as I bridge the remaining distance between us. Niko's posture stiffens as I reach up to brush my fingertips along the lapel of his suit, peering up at him demurely through my lashes and whispering, "If only someone could whisk me away..."

Rather than taking the bait like I hope he will, Niko flinches away from my touch, his pale blue eyes widening in alarm. "Are you trying to get us both killed?" he hisses under his breath, his panicked gaze darting past me, back and forth.

Shit, he's afraid of my husband, too.

In an act of sheer desperation, I step in close again, reaching for his hand and clutching it tightly in both of mine. "Please, Niko," I rasp, staring up at him pleadingly. "I'll do anything you want if you help me get out of here. Anything. "

He yanks his hand away as if he's been burned, showing me his palms as he backs away. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Volkov, but you've got the wrong idea here. My loyalty is to your husband."

"Right answer."

My blood turns to ice in my veins the moment Roman's harsh voice cuts through the air. My heart trips over its valves, lungs seizing in panic as I twist around to meet his cold, soulless eyes. I open my mouth to speak, but no sound comes out, true fear gripping me like a noose when I realize it's not Roman I'm looking at. It's Mr. Hyde.

"Niko, you can go," he bites out, his voice an eerie, sinister monotone. His stare stays locked with mine as he adds, "I need some time alone with my wife ."

My throat tightens, a wave of nausea rolling through me as Niko abruptly turns on a heel and heads straight for the back door like the good soldier he is, leaving me alone to dance with the devil.

I thought he could be my way out of here. I hoped he was a better man than the one I married.

I was wrong.

At the sound of the door snicking closed behind Niko, I finally find my voice, grasping for some way to explain away what Roman just saw. "I wasn't... I didn't..."

I stammer, feebly trying to come up with some passable excuse, but my husband just calmly holds up a hand, silencing my pathetic display.

“It seems you’ve forgotten who you belong to,” he murmurs, taking a threatening step in my direction.

I flinch, retreating a step to maintain the distance between us and shaking my head. “No, you don’t understand...”

He takes another step forward, and I take another back.

“I was testing him,” I say, my mind working overtime to piece together the lie. “I’ve seen the way he looks at me, and the two of you work so closely...”

Another step forward. Another back.

“I wanted to test his loyalty, make sure you could trust him,” I rush out, drawing a sharp gasp as my back meets the hard surface of the built-in bookshelves, my stomach flipping.

Roman eats up the remaining space between us in two long strides, slapping his hands against the shelves at either side of my shoulders, caging me in with his massive build. My throat bobs with a hard swallow, my voice shaky as I continue.

“I did it for us , Roman,” I breathe, reaching up to cup his jaw. I’m acting my ass off right now, my thumb caressing his cheek as I gaze into his eyes adoringly.

His lips slowly curve into a smile, and that’s when I know I’ve failed. It’s not a pleasant or reassuring smile. It’s the type of smile that promises pain; the kind I imagine the grim reaper would wear while collecting his victims.

A low chuckle rumbles in his chest as he shifts his hands from the shelves to the sides of my body, the bandage on his left hand tickling my skin as he trails both down to rest on the curve of my waist. “Oh, pet,” he tuts, shaking his head. “What pretty lies you spin.”

I yelp as his fingers tighten around my middle, and before I can even blink, he’s spinning me around, hauling me back against his chest and dragging me toward the patio door. I scream as loud as I can, kicking and thrashing as he manhandles me over the threshold and out onto the lawn.

The crisp night air bites at my exposed skin, my useless screams echoing in the eerie silence of the night. There’s nobody around to hear them; nobody coming to rescue me. I should’ve known better than to cross Roman. It was a desperate, impulsive move— one that’s sure to cost me my life.

He leans down, his warm breath fanning my neck as he murmurs into the shell of my ear. “Since you seem to be confused as to who owns you, we’re going to play a little game to help you remember.” His grip around me suddenly slackens, arms falling to his sides as he whispers, “run.”

I take off like a bat out of hell, kicking off my heels and sprinting barefoot across the damp grass. I have no idea where I’m even headed, just that I need to run for my goddamn life. Adrenaline floods my veins as my legs pump faster, lungs seizing with the effort and throat burning with every labored breath.

When I come upon the hedge maze, it’s a split-second decision that has me darting inside, feet slapping against the dirt path as I disappear between the rows of towering shrubbery. This place is disorienting enough in the daylight, but at night, the shadows cast by the pale glow of the moon make it damn near impossible to navigate. The vodka I just drank on an empty stomach probably doesn’t help, either. I almost run straight into a hedge before I manage to skid around the corner, my heart thundering

in my chest as I twist and weave my way deeper into the maze.

I'm hyperventilating so much that I start to get lightheaded, my steps slowing as I search for a dark corner to hide out in and catch my breath. Slinking into a shadowed alcove, I press a hand against my chest, willing my pulse to slow as I listen intently for any sign of Roman's pursuit. It's difficult to hear anything over the sound of the blood pumping in my ears, though, and the eerie silence sets my teeth on edge.

The snap of a twig behind me has me jerking away from the corner in alarm, whipping around to blink through the darkness. I press a hand over my mouth to quiet the sound of my own breathing, but then another twig snaps, sounding like it's right on the opposite side of the hedge.

I take off running again, and this time, I'm certain there's another set of footsteps echoing behind me. Terror tightens my throat at every corner, part of me knowing that it's only a matter of time before I turn one and find Roman waiting there. I run and run until my lungs feel like they're about to burst, then tuck into another dark alcove to catch my breath again, trembling with fear as I strain my ears to listen for the shadow of death hunting me.

The rustle of leaves sends me sprinting for my life again. I have no idea whether it's Roman or just the wind, but I'm worked up into such a panic at this point that I can't tell the difference between reality and my own wild imagination. The branches catch on my clothes and scrape my skin as I bump into the hedges, stumbling over my feet as I twist around each corner.

Light suddenly comes into view up ahead and for a fleeting, desperate second, I think I've found the end of the maze. I put forth a last burst of energy, even as I hear the pounding footsteps behind me start to close in. Even as I burst out of the hedge maze to find that I'm right back where I fucking started.

There's no time to mourn my failure. I hook a right, feet sliding in the wet grass as I run past the maze in the direction of the forest beyond. My tangled hair twists around my face as the breeze kicks up, but I don't even feel the cold anymore. My entire body's burning with adrenaline, running purely on vodka and the instinct to survive.

The gravestones of the family cemetery plot cast ghoulish shadows over the ground as I stumble past them, desperate to get to the thick cover of trees beyond. The single-minded pursuit of escape gives me tunnel vision. I'm not paying enough attention to the ground beneath my feet, so I'm completely unprepared when it suddenly gives way, my foot hooking over a soft edge carved into the earth and sending me tumbling downwards. My shriek pierces the air as I rapidly descend into a dark hole, the air punching from my lungs when I land on the cold, hard ground.

The fall is so disorienting that it takes me a second to even realize what happened. Pain shoots through my body from the force of the impact, a feeble groan slipping from my throat as I roll onto my side, curling in on myself. I gasp for breath, gently wiggling my fingers and toes before moving onto my limbs, testing them for any sign of serious injury.

By some miracle, nothing feels like it's broken— just bruised to hell. I groan at the effort it takes to roll over and push up to stand, blinking chaotically as I swivel my gaze around and finally take stock of my surroundings. Terror chokes my throat at the realization that it's not just a random sinkhole I stumbled into. It's a fucking grave.

Six feet deep and rectangular, there's no mistaking what this is. The dirt walls around me feel like they're closing in, the pain in my body instantly forgotten as adrenaline overtakes me again. I rush forward to claw at the loose dirt, desperately searching for a handhold I can use to climb up and out.

My heart stutters in my chest at the sound of scuffling footsteps from above, a shadow falling over me as Roman approaches the edge of the grave.

“When we said ‘til death do us part, I didn’t know you’d take it so literally,” he chuckles, the toes of his expensive shoes hanging over the edge as he peers down at me through the inky darkness.

My hands tremble as I raise them in the air, slowly backing away. “Roman, please,” I croak.

He crouches down, cocking his head to the side. “Please what , pet?”

“Please don’t kill me,” I whisper.

A smirk pulls at the corner of his lips, forest green eyes twinkling with amusement as he arches a brow. “Now why would I do that?”

He’s just toying with me now, batting my emotions around like a cat with a mouse.

“I’m sorry, okay?” I choke out, tears springing to my eyes. “You win. I’m yours. I promise I won’t try to leave, I promise I’ll be a good wife for you. Please ...”

Roman swings his weight forward, gripping onto the edge of the grass as he hops down into the grave with me. I flinch when the soles of his feet hit the ground with a soft thud, the man landing as gracefully as a panther before brushing his palms together and straightening to his full height. “You want to be good for me, pet?” he asks with a lift of his chin, his predatory stare burning into me.

“Yes,” I breathe, head bobbing up and down frantically.

“Yes what ?”

“ Yes, Sir .”

His lips curve in a satisfied grin. “ Good girl .”

Roman’s praise washes over me like an aphrodisiac, heat licking up my spine from the potency of those two simple words.

He lifts a hand, crooking a finger to beckon me. “Come here.”

My feet shuffle against the dirt on their own accord, carrying me toward my damnation. I tilt my head back to maintain eye contact as I draw closer, not coming to a stop until we’re toe to toe.

My husband gazes down at me with a sinister promise in his eyes, reaching out to brush a stray strand of hair away from my face. “Who do you belong to, Eliza?” he asks, the low, velvety rumble of his voice sending a fresh rush of heat surging through me.

“You,” I whisper.

He gives me a single nod, dragging the backs of his knuckles gently over my cheek. “Take your clothes off.”

Without a second’s hesitation, I reach for the hem of my dress, pulling it off over my head. Then I bring my hands behind my back to unfasten my bra, shrugging it down my arms and dropping it to the ground in front of me, followed by my panties. A shiver runs through me as I straighten to my full height, the cold air biting at my bare skin as I meet Roman’s penetrating stare once more.

“Now lie down,” he directs, tipping his head.

I suck in a breath as I step backwards, slowly lowering myself down to the cold dirt. Suppressing another shiver, I ease back, stretching my legs out in front of me and

resting my head back against the ground, blinking up at my husband in quiet resignation.

“Play dead,” Roman commands.

A fresh spike of fear ricochets through me as I close my eyes, praying to a god I don’t believe in that I’ll live past this night. Despite it all, I somehow manage to quiet my mind, focusing on making my breaths as shallow as possible and not moving a muscle. I hear the clink of Roman’s belt, the rustle of his clothes.

“You make such a pretty corpse, pet,” he drawls, the earth beneath me gently vibrating with his footsteps as he circles my body. “You’re not any good to me dead though, are you?”

Am I supposed to answer, or keep playing dead?

After a few beats of silence, I cautiously blink my eyes open, startling when I find Roman crouched down beside me, his face hovering right above mine. I suck in a sharp gasp, a heady mix of terror and arousal flooding my bloodstream.

Jesus, some part of me is just as fucked up as he is. We both get off on my fear.

“No,” I answer, the word falling from my lips on a shaky breath.

He smirks as he reaches for my breast. His fingers close around my nipple, and I hiss through a wince as he pinches the hardened tip. “If you were dead, I wouldn’t get to see that look in your eyes that I’ve come to crave,” he drawls, pinching harder and twisting while I stifle a whimper. “That look you get when the pain starts to bleed to pleasure.”

My back arches, pussy pulsing at the rapturous shot of pain that zips through my

body. My teeth sink into the cushion of my lower lip to bite back my moan, Roman's eyes darkening in delight.

"You're like a drug to me, Eliza," he growls, releasing my nipple and trailing his calloused fingers down my belly. "So addictive that I'd have to bury myself here with you if there ever came a day when I couldn't get another hit." I cry out as his hand plunges between my thighs, fingers gliding through my wetness and circling my clit. "You're addicted to the game too, aren't you?" he muses, my thighs trembling as he works my clit expertly. "I think we should play another to punish you for acting out tonight. What do you think?"

"Y-yes," I agree, both because I know that's the only acceptable answer and because I'm willing to say just about anything to keep him touching me like he is.

"Good girl," he groans, fingers moving faster, driving me closer to the brink of ruin. "I'm going to fuck you now, pet, and you're going to enjoy every second of me claiming what's mine, aren't you?"

"Yes!" I cry, my back arching and toes curling.

"But you won't get to come," Roman adds darkly, abruptly halting his ministrations. He leans his face in closer, the tip of his nose brushing mine as he says, "I'm going to bring you to the edge, over and over, and just when you're about to come, I'm going to pull you back. Again and again, until you're begging for me to end your suffering and bury you in this grave."

I open my mouth to protest, but then his fingers start moving against my clit again, my stomach swooping.

"And after I'm satisfied that you've been thoroughly punished, I'll forgive your indiscretion with Niko and the way you tried to leave me," he grits out, anger flashing

in his eyes as he recounts the incident that led us here in the first place. He brings his other hand up to wrap around my throat, staring deeply into my eyes. “How does that sound, darling?”

My mouth hinges open, my thighs trembling. “Yes, okay,” I pant.

He pinches my clit in warning and my body seizes, my tangled thoughts tripping over my mistake.

“Yes, Sir !”

A low chuckle rumbles in Roman’s chest as he withdraws his fingers and pats my mound, my hips bucking up instinctively to chase his touch. “Oh, Eliza,” he groans, gazing down at me in sinister fascination. “You really are perfect for us.”

Before I can process the fact that he just actually acknowledged his alter-ego, he crawls over my body, shoving my thighs apart and tossing one of my legs up over his shoulder. Lining the broad tip of his cock up with my opening, he plunges inside, bottoming out in a single, brutal thrust. My muscles clench, a cry tearing from my throat at the sudden intrusion, but then his thumb lands on my clit and the pain instantly morphs to pleasure. He starts pistoning his hips, rutting into me savagely as the coil in my belly winds tighter.

I actually delude myself into thinking he’ll let me come, but the moment my climax is within reach, he abruptly withdraws his touch, slowing his thrusts to a languid pace while I squirm for relief and curse his name. My breathing gradually slows as Roman gently pumps his hips, the coil inside me unwinding.

“Bastard,” I grit out, sinking my fingernails into his muscular thighs.

Roman just chuckles darkly in response, sliding my leg off his shoulder. In one fluid

motion, he grips my hips and rises up onto his knees, lifting my ass off the ground and pounding into me harder. This angle is torture to my g-spot and he knows it. Within seconds, I'm clawing at the dirt, hurtling toward a soul-sucking climax.

Right as I'm cresting the peak, he pulls out, my inner walls clenching on air as he flips me over and cracks his palm against my ass. "Hands and knees, pet."

I yell out in frustration as I scramble to comply, his velvety tip gliding through my folds as soon as I push up from the ground. He spreads my slickness up to my ass, teasing the tight ring with the head of his cock before sliding it back down and thrusting into my pussy. The savage invasion steals the air from my lungs as he starts roughly fucking me from behind, his hands squeezing my cheeks, thumb moving inward to press against my back hole. A needy moan tumbles from my lips as he starts pushing the digit inside, my ass throbbing as he buries it up to the knuckle.

"Please, Roman," I whine, rocking back against him to meet his greedy thrusts.

He grunts in dissatisfaction.

"Please, Sir ," I correct.

He strokes a palm down my spine, slowing the movement of his hips. "Tell me what you need, pet."

"I need to come," I choke, my inner walls clenching around him. "Please, let me come."

"Bad girls don't get to come, Eliza," he tuts.

I gasp as Roman suddenly pulls out, collapsing onto my elbows and screaming in frustration as he leaves me wanting yet again.

“You fucking asshole!” I spit, jerking my head sideways to cut him a glare over my shoulder, angry tears streaming down my cheeks.

“What was that, pet?” he mocks, the slick tip of his cock nudging my back hole. “You want my cock in your ass?”

I nod frantically, wincing at the pressure as he eases his hips forward. It hurt last time, but it also made me come. I need to come.

“Say it,” he growls.

“Please, fuck my ass!” I cry out shamelessly.

“Well since you asked so nicely,” Roman chuckles, his fingers sinking into the flesh of my hips. He yanks me backwards, pulling me onto his thick cock.

I choke on air as his broad head breaches my resistance, my pain and pleasure receptors tangling in a twisted symphony of sensation as his dick glides deeper into my tight hole. It doesn’t hurt as much as it did last time; his shaft is practically dripping in the slickness of my arousal. He pauses when he’s halfway inside, granting me a brief moment to adjust before thrusting in further, my fingers curling into the dirt and my mouth falling open on a silent scream.

It shouldn’t feel so good for him to debase me like this, but I can’t deny my body’s reaction to his assault. Roman’s fingers dig bruises into my hips as he slides all the way home, his pelvis meeting my ass with a slap. I shudder an exhale, my body trembling with dark delight as he slowly pulses his hips. The moment he feels me relax into it, he ups his pace, arousal scorching through my veins as he starts ruthlessly fucking my ass.

His hand hooks under my hip, deft fingers finding my clit and resuming my torture.

My throat is raw, my moans turning hoarse while tears track wet paths down my cheeks. I hate how responsive I am to his touch; how easily he can draw out my pleasure and how cruelly he can control it. But even more than that, I hate how much I want it; how much I crave his specific brand of torment.

Roman's thrusts become frantic, his ragged breathing signaling that he's close. I am, too, and there's nothing I want more right now than for him to let me come.

"Please!" I beg, the pressure within me building until I can hardly bear it.

Roman snaps his hips forward with a roar, his cock pulsing inside my ass as he reaches his own climax. Heavy breaths saw from his lungs as he empties inside me, then slowly eases out, slapping my ass as I collapse to the ground in a sweaty, trembling heap beneath him.

Rage and indignation scorch my veins as I lie there panting to catch my breath, still wound up tight and hopelessly unfulfilled.

"You took that so well," Roman murmurs, leaning over to stroke my hair back from my face. "Maybe I should let you come after all."

A surge of hope flares to life in my chest as he rolls me to my back, rocking back on his knees and gazing down at me reverently.

"Would you like that, pet?"

"Please," I whisper hoarsely, feebly lifting a hand and brushing my fingertips along the harsh line of his jaw. It may just be the desperate state I'm in, but I swear he's the most gorgeous man I've ever laid eyes on. I crave this monster with every fiber of my being.

His lips pull back from his teeth in a menacing grin as he slides his hands up my thighs, spreading me wide. “Make a mess all over my face, beautiful girl,” he growls, green eyes glinting with delight as he dives in to feast on my pussy.

I bury my hands in his hair with a scream, back arching and head tipping back while he licks into me like a man starved. He tongues my clit, nipping it with his teeth savagely before suctioning his lips over the sensitive bud, driving me to the edge of bliss in a matter of seconds.

This time, he doesn’t stop. I careen over the cliff of release, freefalling into a life-altering climax. My body convulses as I gush all over his face, coming harder than I ever have in my entire fucking life. Roman laps up every drop like the ravenous beast he is, his stubble rasping against my inner thighs. It’s so intense that my vision tunnels, darkness threatening to take me under.

Roman’s name is on my lips as I give into the rapture of unconsciousness, eyes rolling back as I succumb to the dark.

26

I 'm cocooned in warmth, safe and content. Pleasant scents of rose and jasmine tickle my senses as a soft cloth glides over my skin, the soothing sound of lapping water gently rousing me to consciousness.

“Welcome back,” Roman murmurs as my eyes flutter open, colliding with the striking green of his own.

Strangely enough, the sight of him beside my bathtub isn't disarming. It's oddly comforting to find him here, his sleeves rolled up to the elbows as he runs a washcloth over my naked body beneath the water.

My husband has never cared for me like this before.

This can't be real.

I must be dreaming.

“Are you alright?” he asks, his jaw clenching as he trails the washcloth over a dark bruise forming on my upper thigh.

I open my mouth to respond, but no words come out. It's like I've forgotten how to speak. I'm so, so tired, exhaustion weighing down my limbs.

“Rest now, wife,” he commands in a low, even tone that brokers no room for argument. “Let me take care of you.”

I release a long exhale, my eyes sliding closed. It's a nice dream, so there's no harm in lingering here a little while longer.

The familiar sounds of Clara setting up breakfast pull me from the dark haven of sleep, the bright light streaming in through my bedroom windows assaulting my retinas as I squint my eyes open. I'm not sure how I slept through the housemaid's daily ritual of throwing every damn curtain open, but as the soreness in my body registers when I shift positions, everything suddenly begins flooding back. The chase. The maze. The grave.

No wonder I slept like the dead.

"Good morning, Mrs. Volkov," Clara greets perfunctorily as I force myself to sit up in bed, throwing the covers back to stretch my aching limbs and take stock of the fresh bruises dotting my skin.

"Good morning," I sigh, sliding out of bed with a wince. It feels like I'm in a haze as I limp over to the breakfast table and snatch up the steaming coffee mug, my thoughts sluggish and disjointed.

My body is sore but clean, my hair still slightly damp. I must've showered, but I have no recollection of it, nor do I remember returning to the manor or getting into bed.

Clara heads into my closet while I stare out the window sipping my coffee, hoping the caffeine will jumpstart my brain. For all the things I hate about the manor, I'll admit that the coffee here is top notch. Not only is it somehow always the ideal temperature, but it's also rich and smooth, the flavor bold and delicious.

I'll miss it when I'm gone.

"They're calling for rain this afternoon," Clara informs me as she emerges from my

closet with a stack of clothes, crossing the room to set them neatly at the foot of my bed.

“I’ll let the dogs in before it starts so they don’t get the floors muddy,” I murmur, watching the two of them from my window as they troll the perimeter of the lawn.

Clara quietly huffs to convey her disapproval, but she doesn’t verbalize it. I think at this point she’s begrudgingly accepted that there’s no point in trying to talk me out of turning the guard dogs into house pets.

The retreating tap of her Mary Jane’s against the floor signals her departure, the door closing with a soft click. My eyes glaze over as I continue staring out the window numbly, draining the rest of the coffee in my mug. Then I return to the table and refill it from the carafe, sitting down and eating every bite of the veggie omelet and breakfast potatoes on my plate, my appetite ravenous since Roman and I never made it to dinner last night. Not to mention the other strenuous... activities we engaged in.

Why does the memory of him chasing me through that maze excite me?

It’s far too much to unpack right now, so I don’t. I file it away in a box in my mind, shoving it all the way to the back of my consciousness until it’s no more than a distant notion; a detached afterthought. If I don’t acknowledge it, then it isn’t real. If I keep on ignoring the sinister truths about myself, I can remain in denial about how I’ve become just as depraved as my husband.

Maybe I always have been. I’m not sure whether he’s conditioned this response or if something dark has been lurking inside me all along, just waiting to come out to play. On the surface, I’m all pretty smiles and agreeable nods, but I felt the resentment brewing beneath long before my arrival at the manor, my rage simmering like a rising tempest. The very act of rebellion that led me here was borne of wrath.

Did I even want Wesley, or did I just want to retaliate against my father for years of abuse and neglect?

I knew he'd go ballistic when he caught us. I knew it'd undermine his plan to trade me off to Ilya Belov, a man forty years my senior, as a virgin bride. And I knew he was home that day, right down the hall from my room to hear my moans.

It was me . I set off this chain of events.

I sit with the ugly truth of it all for a few minutes as I stare blankly out the window, quietly sipping another cup of coffee. Then I pack it away again, burying the memories so deep in my brain that they cease to exist. I'm the victim, not the catalyst.

When the caffeine finally starts to kick in, I get dressed and throw my hair up in a messy bun, snatching the bag of dog biscuits off the breakfast tray and heading for the door. Vesper and Nox come running as soon as I set foot outside and whistle for them, panting eagerly as I crouch down to reward them with the treats. They devour them and lick the crumbs from my hands, their stubby tails wagging as I scratch underneath their collars and nuzzle into their fur.

“What do you wanna do today, boys?” I ask them as I push up to my feet, glancing around the lawn.

Every day on the estate is the same, the repetition starting to wear on me as they all blur together. Should I count paces? Check if Lev is around the shed? Explore the maze?

Definitely not that last one. I won't be going anywhere near the hedge maze or cemetery while the memories of last night's game remain fresh.

I start walking aimlessly across the lawn, Nox trotting off ahead of me and Vesper

lagging behind. The garden shed comes into view and I spot Lev tinkering with something on a table beside it, his head down and concentration creasing his brow. Ordinarily, I'd wander over to chat with him, but instead I turn away. I'm not in the mood to fake smiles today.

My apathetic meandering somehow leads me to the gardens, the dogs chasing scents as they roam the paths with me in search of rabbits. The dahlias are dead. Lev clipped the last few blooms after he caught me in the shed, but I haven't enjoyed looking at them. They're just a reminder that everyone here is under my husband's thumb, including me.

I roam the grounds of the estate until the air turns chillier, signaling the impending storm. Not wanting to get caught in it, I coax the dogs back toward the manor and they're thrilled to be invited in, my twin shadows taking off down the hall as soon as we enter the foyer. I follow them to the back of the house, entering the study to find Roman lurking by the bar cart, pouring himself a drink.

"Little early for that, isn't it?" I comment as he splashes vodka into a crystal tumbler.

"Not if you drink with me," he grumbles, reaching for a second glass.

"No thanks," I scoff, turning up my nose at him as I strut past to join the dogs by the fire. The frigid breeze planted a chill in my bones and being in the same room as my husband isn't helping matters.

The sound of clinking glass fills the silence as Roman finishes up at the bar cart, his shoes clipping against the marble floor as he crosses the study.

"Here," he grunts, stepping up beside me and thrusting a tumbler of vodka in my direction.

I turn an irritated glare on him, grinding my molars as my eyes flit between his own and the glass in his hand.

I told him I didn't want it.

Then again, if I'm going to be subjected to his company, a buzz would make it less unpleasant.

I take the drink.

Roman raises his own to his lips, sinking the vodka in a single gulp. I sip at mine as I watch the dogs sniff around for a comfortable spot to lie down, trying my best to ignore the way my pulse flutters at my husband's proximity.

Did he bathe me, or was that a dream?

The lines of reality are blurring lately, as if Roman's unstable nature is somehow rubbing off on me. Is mental illness contagious? I should consult those psychology textbooks again to find out.

I throw back the rest of my drink, wincing at the burn as I swallow the liquor down. "I wanted to talk to you about something," I murmur, flickering Roman a side-eyed glance.

"What's that?" he asks absently.

I worry my lower lip between my teeth, struggling to piece together the best way to confront him about his obvious case of Dissociative Identity Disorder. Whether consciously or not, he acknowledged his alter last night. He's clearly sick and in need of help.

“I’ve been doing some research, and I think you’re mentally ill,” I state, holding his eye contact.

He snorts in amusement. “I assure you I’m not crazy, but it’s starting to sound like you are.”

“Roman, I’m serious,” I breathe, reaching out to set a hand on his arm. “I’ve read up on this condition called DID, where people have multiple personalities. There’s medications you can take, therapy you can do...”

He barks a laugh, the sound of it so shocking that the crystal tumbler slips from my grip, crashing to the floor. I immediately crouch down to pick up the shattered glass, the sharp edge of a shard slicing into my ring finger.

“Shit,” I hiss, clutching the injured digit with my other hand.

Roman drops to a knee beside me, snapping out a hand to grasp onto mine. He holds it up in front of his face, examining the cut on my finger as a crimson drips onto the diamond resting at my knuckle.

“It’s a bleeder, but it doesn’t need stitches,” he murmurs, plucking the silk pocket square from his suit jacket and wrapping it around my finger to staunch the flow. His gaze lifts, emerald eyes meeting mine. “You need to be more careful,” he growls sternly.

“Yeah, like you?” I scoff, reaching for his left hand and lifting it in demonstration, expecting to see the bandage he’s been sporting. Except it isn’t there. And when I flip his hand over, the skin of his palm is unmarked.

“Wha...?” My brow furrows in confusion as I grab for his other hand, turning it over and finding the palm just as pristine. “You had a cut.”

“It healed,” Roman replies dismissively.

I shake my head with a scowl, blonde hair swishing around my face. “No, it couldn’t have, not that fast...”

Shit, did he bleed on me a day ago, a week ago?

I’m starting to lose track of time, the profound isolation of life at the manor warping my reality.

How long have I been here? Weeks? Months?

No, it couldn’t have been that long since he injured his hand. And regardless, a cut that deep would surely leave a scar. Did I misconstrue how deep it was? But if it was minor, he wouldn’t have continued to wear a bandage...

My heart pounds, short, panicked breaths sawing from my lungs as I jerk my wide-eyed gaze up to Roman.

Shit, what if he’s right? What if I’m the crazy one?

I stumble backwards, shaking my head. “No, it’s not possible...”

“Calm down, Eliza,” Roman murmurs as he steps toward me.

“No, don’t!” I shriek, frantically jumping out of his reach.

His lips turn down in a frown as he continues his advance. “I think you need to lie down, wife.”

“No, stay away from me!” I choke, throwing out my hands as panic takes hold.

Is he gaslighting me, or have I finally snapped?

Roman grunts in annoyance as he lunges for me, his hands closing around my waist. My world flips upside-down as he tosses me over his shoulder, carrying me from the room while I kick and curse, pounding my fists against his back. My vision spins, panic intensifying as he carries me up the stairs.

To my room.

To my bed.

To my certain demise.

27

It's dark and quiet in my room, but Roman's still here.

I was hysterical when he first carried me inside and laid me down on the bed, kicking and screaming and cursing his existence.

Then at some point I went quiet, crushed by the perception of impending doom.

I turned practically catatonic in the thick of my panic attack, sure that I'd never come out of it.

The subsequent letdown of adrenaline after left me exhausted and numb, feeling like I was a stranger in my own body.

Then slowly, I started coming back into myself.

In the hours since my meltdown in the study, my husband has remained stoically by my side, watching over me like a corrupt guardian angel. I don't know why. It's not like him to care. Still, there's something oddly comforting in his sustained presence; something I'm not quite ready to part with.

Perhaps I'm not quite ready to part with him at all.

Maybe we're both crazy. The term itself is so esoteric; it can mean any number of things depending on the connotation. Crazy can mean absurd or bizarre, exciting or deranged. It can mean angry, aggressive, stupid, or annoying. It can also mean wild

and uncontrollable. Passionate. With such a broad spectrum of interpretations, I'd venture to say that most people can be a little crazy, and like poetry it all depends on the inflection.

I suppose the silver lining of my freakout is that it left my mind in a gloriously quiet state, similar to how I feel while Roman delivers a spanking. I spent the evening simply existing ; content with just being present while my mixed-up brain slowly pieced itself back together.

Roman had Clara deliver our dinner here, and we didn't change our clothes or make any preparations. The two of us just sat at my little breakfast table and ate our roast beef and vegetables in silence, like some old married couple far beyond keeping up pretenses. While Clara cleared our dishes away and turned down my bedding, Roman helped me into my pajamas. Then he stripped down to his boxer briefs and climbed right into bed with me, as if it was our regular nightly routine.

It wasn't, it isn't , and still, I'm strangely at peace with my monster lying right beside me. His chest is pressed tightly against my back, a possessive arm banded around my waist. I can feel his warm breaths rustle my hair, slow and measured. He's asleep. I'm not.

I shift my weight to get more comfortable, Roman's cock stirring to life against my backside in response to the barest movement. Maybe he's dreaming of me. Do I want him to dream of me? Sometimes I dream of him.

Filthy scenes that have featured in those dreams filter into my mind, a gentle throb starting up between my thighs. I squeeze them together tightly, arching against Roman as I adjust my position. His cock thickens, a low groan rattling from his throat as he splays a palm against my belly.

"Do you need something, wife?" he growls, his voice rough from sleep.

“Yes,” I breathe. Why bother denying it at this point?

His chest vibrates with a low hum as he slides his hand down into my silk sleep shorts, deft fingers finding my clit and rubbing it in tight, controlled circles. “Is this what you need?”

“Mhmm,” I whimper, sinking my teeth into my lower lip as he plays my body like the strings of a harp. I pant and writhe against him as he works me up, then he tosses the covers away, strips us both bare, and climbs on top of me, parting my thighs and coating the tip of his dick in my wetness.

“You need your husband to fuck you, Eliza?” he murmurs, teasing my clit with his velvety crown.

“Please,” I rasp, wrapping my legs around his waist to draw him in closer.

He plunges inside me with a throaty growl, the muscle in his neck straining as he works himself deeper. I moan as he stretches and fills me, pleasure scorching my veins as he rides my body. This is the only thing that’s real. This is the only time I’m completely, unapologetically, me .

Hooking an arm behind my back, Roman yanks me up from the bed, my nipples scraping against his chest as he rocks back and pushes up to his knees. I grip onto his shoulders for leverage as he starts bouncing me up and down on his cock, his hands directing my hips and our ragged breaths mingling in the space between us.

As caught up as I am in the moment, a sudden flash of movement in my periphery yanks me right out of it, every muscle in my body tensing as I jerk my gaze toward it.

“The shadow,” I hiss under my breath, blinking into the inky darkness beyond my bed.

“Shh, there’s nothing there,” Roman murmurs against my neck placatingly. His hands tighten around my hips as he ups the pace of his thrusts, trying to pull me back from my distraction.

It doesn’t work, though, because I can’t stop staring at that spot, wondering if my eyes are playing tricks on me or if I’ll see it again.

Roman relents with a disgruntled sigh, tipping forward to lay me back down on the bed and pulling out. Then he swiftly rolls away and for a second, I wonder if I’ve offended him. When he climbs off the bed and steps away, I wonder if he’s about to leave me to the ghosts. Then I watch him pluck his tie from his neatly folded stack of clothes, bringing it back over with him.

Grabbing for my ankle, Roman yanks me over to the edge of the bed, gazing down at me through the dark and cocking a brow. “You like games, don’t you?”

I bite my lip, nodding.

“Lift your head.”

I comply, and Roman leans over me with the tie between his hands, placing it over my eyes and tying it around my head. The abrupt loss of sight is jarring, my pulse kicking up as he checks to ensure it’s secure.

“How’s that?” he asks after making a few more adjustments to my blindfold.

“Good,” I breathe, dropping my head back down to the mattress.

He trails his fingers over my body as he leans back. “Can you see anything?”

“No.”

His touch vanishes. “Then let’s play, pet.”

He sounds further away now, my body coiling with anticipation for whatever he’s planning. The deprivation of one sense heightens the others– I’m suddenly more attuned to sound, smell, touch...

I flinch as Roman’s hands land on my knees, shoving them apart before coasting up my inner thighs. Adrenaline pumps through me, my heart pounding as I feel his warm breath fan against my center, his stubble rasping against my inner thighs. My muscles tense, heart pounding.

The first swipe of his tongue has a needy cry falling from my lips, body shuddering as he begins feasting on me like a ravenous beast. Without the ability to see him, it’s like I feel him so much more– his harsh grip on my thighs, every demanding stroke on his tongue. He suctions his lips over my clit, grazing it with his teeth, and I damn near combust.

As he sucks and nips my clit, driving me closer to the precipice of release, his fingers suddenly latch onto my nipple. He pinches hard and my back arches, toes curling at the fusion of sensation. I’m right there , dangling right on the edge, then his mouth is gone. He withdraws all touch. I pant breathlessly, whipping my head back and forth, tempted to rip off the damn blindfold...

His hand presses against my inner left thigh, his cock notching at my opening. I barely have time to register his new position before he thrusts in deep, pinching my clit as he slams home. I instantly detonate, screaming through my orgasm as he pounds into me, the friction prolonging my pleasure.

My body goes limp against the mattress as I come back down to earth. Roman pulls out, my pulse picking up speed when his touch leaves me once again, anticipation building. I cry out as his teeth close around my hard nipple, fisting the sheets while he

soothes away the sting with his tongue. The saliva he leaves behind makes it harden even further as he retreats and I lay frozen in suspense, awaiting his next advance.

He's between my legs again, pushing inside.

“ Fuck, Roman !” I whine, reaching out for him. My fingers brush against his skin, but he keeps just out of reach, forcing my legs wider and drilling his cock into me with controlled, forceful thrusts.

A hand on my thigh. A hand on my belly. Suddenly it feels as if his hands are everywhere , his presence all consuming. Without my sense of sight, his touch is all I have to anchor me in this place and tether me to this moment.

His fingers play with my clit, working me up again until I’m shuddering through another climax. Roman continues his torturous game, changing up his position and keeping me on edge. It isn’t until I’ve come for a third time that he follows, pulling out and groaning as I hear the distinctive sound of him fisting his cock. Warmth splashes against my belly as he marks me with his seed, ropes and ropes landing on my skin. I reach down to rub my fingers through his mess, swiping them across my lips and licking his taste away with my tongue.

“Good girl,” Roman drawls, and I swear a little aftershock of my orgasm ripples through me at his praise.

I wilt against the mattress, panting up at the ceiling as I hear the pad of his footsteps move away from the bed. He returns soon after, the mattress dipping beneath his weight as he climbs up alongside me and begins untying the blindfold, the black silk sliding away.

I blink my eyes open, pushing up on my elbows as my vision slowly comes into focus. My husband is right beside me, reaching over to clean my belly with a damp

cloth. There's so much cum.

"I think it'd do you some good to get off the estate," he comments as he wipes his mess away, pulling me back up to the pillows with him and tugging the comforter over our bodies. "We'll have dinner at my father's house tomorrow night."

"Okay," I reply breathily, exhaustion setting in. "Red or black?"

"You choose. Andrew will pick you up at eight."

I tilt my head back to look at him, brows pinching together. "Where will you be?"

"I have business in the city, so I'll have to meet you there," he answers, stroking my hair back from my face with his fingertips. "You need to sleep."

I nod shallowly in agreement, my body melting against his as my eyes slide closed. I do need sleep. And hopefully come tomorrow, my world will start to make sense again.

The soles of my red stilettos kiss the ground outside the car as I gather the skirt of my gown up in a hand, the fabric so delicate that it starts to slip through my fingers. Extending my other hand, I place it in Andrew's waiting palm and allow him to help me to my feet, my heart skipping a beat when I glance up at the intimidating brick facade of Magnus Volkov's mansion.

I've only been here once before, and it wasn't a pleasant experience. Here's hoping this one is a vast improvement.

I drop Andrew's hand and stride confidently toward the front door, smiling when I look down to see the trumpet skirt of my gown seemingly changing color as it catches the light. Though I was given the choice between wearing black or red tonight, I found I couldn't decide. Choosing a color would be akin to choosing one side of Roman over the other— Dr. Jekyll likes black, Mr. Hyde likes red — and I've come to oppose and embrace both equally. So, I found the only garment in my closet that passes as both. The sheer overlay of this dress is deceiving to the eye, much like my husband. In low light, it's black, but in bright light, it's red. A perfect compromise.

As I ascend the steps to the front door, it suddenly opens, the same stuffy butler that greeted me last time pulling it wide with a tight-lipped smile. "You're right on time, Mrs. Volkov," he remarks, stepping aside and gesturing for me to come in. "They just sat down in the dining room."

"Great," I reply politely, even though my punctuality is really owed to Andrew. I was a little late coming downstairs to get in the car, so he must've pushed the speed limits

to make up for lost time. The trip out here felt a lot faster than the one back to the estate on our wedding day.

Déjà vu hits hard as the butler leads me through the dimly-lit halls to the dining room, rapping his knuckles once against the closed door before tugging it open and waving me through. I enter to find Magnus seated at the head of the table, my husband on his left. Both stare in my direction as I advance into the room, but Roman's eyes are the ones that pull me in, brimming with heat as they drop down my body to drink in my appearance.

"Well, if it isn't my new daughter-in-law," Magnus booms, pushing up to his feet with an easy grin and spreading his arms. "Eliza, so nice to see you again."

"You as well," I reply cordially, pausing to allow him to take my hand and brush a kiss against my cheek.

Roman rises from his seat, dipping his chin as I move past his father to approach him. "Wife."

"Husband."

The faintest smile tugs at his lips as we stare each other down.

"Sit, sit," Magnus urges, dropping back into his own chair and fanning his napkin out over his lap. "I heard you like wine, so you're in for a treat. I'm somewhat of a collector, and I uncorked and decanted a vintage Bordeaux to pair with the meal tonight."

Roman extends an arm and presses a hand to the small of my back, guiding me to the seat next to his and pulling out the antique dining chair like a perfect gentleman. It takes everything in me to stifle the amused giggle that threatens to slip from my lips

in response to the gesture. Is he putting on a show for his father? Deciding to play along, I sink down onto it with a shy smile, my stomach fluttering as Roman pushes my chair in and sidesteps to retake his own.

“Go on, try it,” Magnus urges, gesturing to the glass of red waiting in front of my place setting.

I reach for it, swirling the glass as I bring it up to my nose to inhale the aroma. Resting the rim against my lower lip, I slowly tip it back, Roman’s father watching intently as I take a sip.

“Well?” he asks eagerly as I swallow and lower the glass.

“Delicious,” I remark, licking my lips for emphasis before going in for another taste.

“See, I told you I know wine,” Magnus boasts, turning a smug grin on his son.

“It’s still a bit dry for my taste,” Roman shrugs.

As I set my glass back down in front of me and glance around the table, I suddenly realize that there’s a fourth place setting on Magnus’ opposite side, a full glass of red already poured. I don’t recall Roman mentioning that anyone would be joining us tonight, but before I can ask who it might be, the dining room door opens again.

I turn to look in that direction, my heart ceasing to beat as a hauntingly familiar man strolls into the room.

Roman strolls into the room, his distinctive emerald eyes locking with mine and the corner of his mouth lifting in delighted recognition.

I whip my head back around to the man seated beside me, unable to comprehend

what I'm seeing.

I'm seeing double.

Was there something in that wine?

This can't be real.

"About time you showed up," Roman grumbles irritably.

"Had a phone call to make," his double snipes back.

My lungs seize, ears ringing as I snap my head back and forth between the two of them, the newly-arrived Roman striding over to claim the chair on Magnus' other side, opposite his clone.

"My brother, Knox," the one beside me sighs as the other takes his seat.

Brother?

More like his identical fucking twin.

"Don't tell me you've been toying with this one, too?" Magnus groans, scrubbing an exasperated hand down his face. "Didn't you boys learn your lesson after that mess with Alina?"

"She was weak-minded. Eliza isn't," new Roman replies flatly, then turns a devilish grin on me. "Are you, pet?"

My mind is spinning so fast that it feels as if it may implode at any moment, nausea roiling in my gut.

“N-nox,” I stammer, starting to hyperventilate. “Like Roman’s dog?”

“ Our dog, and no. My name has a K in front of it.” He lifts his chin haughtily as he reaches for his glass of wine, my eyes catching on the bandage wrapped around his hand. The hand that bled on me. As he brings the glass to his smirking lips and tosses the wine back like a shot of liquor, the pieces start slotting together in my brain, everything suddenly coming together with startling clarity.

The cut.

The mood swings.

Red and black.

Cherie’s remark about the dog’s name.

“I told you it was weird to name him that,” Roman grumbles.

“Thought I’d make things easy on you, since you tend to forget names,” Knox replies, giving his brother a pointed look.

Roman frowns. “That was one time. When are you-”

I slap my palms loudly against the dark wood tabletop, rudely interrupting the bickering siblings. “Is someone gonna tell me what the hell is going on here?” I demand, throwing all sense of decorum out the window.

Roman turns to meet my eyes, calm and controlled as always. “I think you already know,” he replies coolly.

He’s right; I do . All this time, there weren’t two sides to Roman. There were two of

them , Roman and Knox. I've been living with both. Dining with both. Fucking both.

“We weren't planning on doing this so soon, but some things have come to light and it's a necessary evil,” he continues, those intense green eyes boring into mine. “We need to bring you in on our plans involving your father.”

“My father?” I choke, suddenly horribly lightheaded.

“Yes. Do you remember when he rose in position?”

No. I can barely form a coherent thought right now– I just keep looking back and forth between the two men, my mind tripping over itself at the impossibility.

And yet it makes so much sense. I should've put it together sooner. But I never saw them in the same room, never considered that there could be two of them. Of all the sick games my husband played with me, this one is by far the most inconceivable, demented...

“Great, now she's just going to throw herself from the tower like the last one,” Magnus groans, flopping back in his chair with an exasperated sigh and stabbing his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair.

“Not Eliza,” Knox snarls, pounding a fist against the table so hard that the silverware clatters. “She's strong. She can handle this.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, squeezing my eyes shut as all three men continue to speculate about the chances of me offing myself. I open my mouth to tell them to stop but as soon as I do, bile rushes up my throat, my stomach twisting. I barely have time to fling my upper body sideways over the arm of the chair before vomit spews from my mouth, splashing against the pristinely polished mahogany floors.

Even though he's seated furthest from me and thus well outside the splatter zone, Magnus recoils in disgust, the legs of his chair screeching against the hardwood as he jolts back with a grimace.

"I told you she wasn't ready for this," Roman admonishes angrily, shooting up to his feet and throwing his napkin down on the table. He sidesteps and pulls my chair back, grasping onto my bicep to help me out of it.

"Come, let's get you back home," he murmurs, brushing my hair behind my shoulder and sending goosebumps skittering across my exposed skin. His touch is both familiar and foreign. As much as I want to shrink away from it, there's something soothing in the way he presses a hand firmly against the small of my back, taking control of the situation.

I should feel anything but safe with this man, yet the juxtaposition of these tender moments against his otherwise callous demeanor has lulled me into a distorted sense of complacency. Better the devil I know.

"Home?" I ask, blinking up at him as another wave of nausea rolls through me.

"Yes, we're going back to the manor," he responds frankly. "You clearly need some time to process all of this."

Understatement of the century. I need more than time; what I really need is a fucking lobotomy.

"You're leaving?" Magnus scoffs, rising to stand. "But what about...?"

"Later," Knox snarls, turning a menacing glare on his father as he, too, pushes up from his seat and rounds the table to join me and Roman.

Magnus snaps his mouth closed with a disgruntled huff, all traces of the affable father-in-law gone when he cuts me a cold glare, as if I'm the one at fault for derailing this dinner.

"Let's go," Knox grunts, coming up on my other side and grasping onto my arm, steadying me as the pair begin urging me forward.

My knees buckle beneath my weight as they guide me from the dining room, their bodies bracketing either side of mine like a protective shield. I go with them willingly, even though I'm not sure whether they're marching me to safety or to my execution.

Sadly enough, I'm not sure that I even care anymore.

A numb sense of detachment settles over me as I pause my steps to stare up at the dark exterior of the manor upon our return, Roman and Knox coming to a stop on either side and looking to me questioningly.

“I just need a minute,” I whisper, eyes fixed on the gothic arched windows above the heavy front door.

“Take your time,” Knox nods, continuing forward.

Roman hesitates for a moment, jaw tightening as he lingers in indecision. Then he, too, nods, starting after his brother toward the house.

Even their strides are identical. If it weren't for the differences in the suits they're wearing, I wouldn't be able to tell the twins apart. It's no wonder they were able to deceive me so easily.

Blowing out a measured breath, I pull my black fur stole tighter around my shoulders and swivel to glance out over the estate grounds. I hear the door to the manor open and close as the men retreat inside. The glow of the town car's taillights fades in the distance, the sound of gravel beneath the tires growing more faint as Andrew drives away. It gives way to relative silence, save for the creepy nocturnal noises of the estate. A breeze rustles the leaves of the trees in the forest; the metal garden gate creaks on its hinges.

Everything about this place scared me when I first arrived, but now there's an odd

sense of comfort in the familiarity of it all. The same can be said for my husband. I don't fear him quite like I used to, and there's some semblance of relief in finally knowing the truth about the Volkov twins; in verifying that I actually haven't been losing my mind here.

So many questions remain unanswered, but at the moment I'm still coming to grips with the reality of Jekyll and Hyde being two separate people. I'd thoroughly convinced myself the man I married had a split personality– I had the psychology texts to back up my theory. And even after Roman's denial when I confronted him, I was sure I'd unearthed the truth and he was merely deflecting.

I should've known.

There's always another side to the story.

The sudden sound of approaching footsteps startles me so much that I jump, whipping sideways to see a silhouette creeping toward me alongside the house, distorted by the shadows. I suck in a gasp, eyes widening in terror– but just as I'm about to scream, my father's gardener steps out from the darkness and whispers my name.

“Wesley?” I choke, face screwing up in confusion. I dart a quick glance back and forth before rushing toward him, my heart leaping into my throat. “What are you doing here?” I hiss sharply.

I haven't seen him since the day my father caught us in bed together and put a gun to his head, but he still looks the same. Shaggy blonde hair, pale blue eyes, lanky build. Startlingly small and boyish compared to Roman.

“I'm here to save you,” he breathes, his lips curving into a brittle smile that doesn't quite meet his eyes. He reaches behind his back as I step in front of him, but then

there's a sudden blur of movement, a flash of something metallic, a spray of hot blood splashing across my face and chest.

Wesley's hands fly up to clutch at his throat, split wide and gushing crimson. A garbled, choking sound escapes his ruddy lips as he collapses to the ground, my husband standing stone-faced behind him with a blood-drenched blade in his hand.

I stumble backwards, tripping over my heels as I frantically try to wipe the gore off my skin, shock and horror suffocating my lungs.

He killed him.

Roman— I mean Knox — just murdered sweet, innocent Wesley right before my eyes, and as he advances a step in my direction, it's evident I'm next.

A burst of adrenaline rushes through me as survival instinct takes over, triggering my fight or flight response. Dropping my fur stole to the ground, I pivot around, kick off my heels, and run for my fucking life.

I can't beat him in a foot race, so I make a mad dash for the manor, bursting through the front door and sprinting down the hall. I need somewhere to hide. The slap of my bare feet against the marble echoes around me as I pump my legs faster, bound for the study at the back of the house.

I hear one of the twins call my name, but there's no way in hell I'm stopping to answer; not when my life depends on evading him. I dash into the study, straight to the bookcase with the hidden door behind it. Gripping onto the shelf, I throw my weight back to yank it open, registering the sound of footsteps pounding in the hall, approaching the room. The stone staircase descending to the tunnels is no more inviting than the first time I saw it, but I bolt down it nonetheless, intent on concealing myself in the dark.

My eyes don't have nearly enough time to adjust to the pitch-black. I run as fast as I can, but I don't make it far before I careen into a wall, the force of the collision knocking the wind out of me. I stumble back in a daze, spinning around in a circle as I frantically try to orient myself to my surroundings.

Run.

I need to run.

Squinting into the darkness, I just barely make out a diverging tunnel on my left, turning down it without any regard for where it leads.

“Eliza...”

One of them is down here with me. The deep, haunting voice echoes through the stone tunnel as I run faster, bare feet slapping against the cold slab underfoot. My chest heaves with exertion, throat raw from my ragged breathing.

“ Eliza ...”

I skid to a stop as I hear my name called again, this time seemingly from somewhere ahead instead of behind.

The other twin.

They're both here.

It's so dark that I can barely make out anything in front of me. Biting my lip to stifle a whimper, I reach out to run my palms over the damp stone walls, desperately feeling around for an opening. They slip and slide against the rough surface, both from the moisture on the rock and the blood on my hands.

Wesley's blood.

They killed him.

My fingers claw against the craggy wall as I frantically search for a way out. Just like the hedges, these tunnels are a labyrinth; a maze designed to disorient. A game.

The rock suddenly gives beneath my hands as I locate an opening in the roughly hewn stone, tripping forward into the space it creates. My knees bang against the floor as I go down hard, a pained cry escaping my lips on impact. I slap a hand over my mouth to suppress the sound, mentally cursing myself for giving up my location by making a noise.

“There isn't anywhere you can run to that I won't find you, wife ,” the disembodied voice mocks, echoing in the space around me like a death knell.

He sounds closer now. Too close.

I shove up to my feet, springing forward into the darkness at a full sprint. My panted breaths fog the air as they burst from my lips, my exposed arms covered with goosebumps. In the distance, there's a hazy glow of light, and I can barely make out the rough edge of another opening— another turn.

I take it at full speed, immediately regretting my choice when I slam into a wall of stone, barely throwing my hands up in time to brace myself.

A fake opening.

A false hope.

As I stumble backwards, stunned and disoriented, a pair of strong arms suddenly

wrap around my waist from behind, hauling me back against a muscular chest.

A scream tears from my throat as my feet scrabble for purchase against the cold floor, my fingernails digging into the flesh of the arms banded around my waist.

My captor leans down, his heavy breaths rustling my hair and his lips brushing the shell of my ear as he whispers, “Til death do us part, remember?”

“Let me go!” I shriek, kicking and clawing at him.

“Never,” he growls back.

My terrified scream pierces the air as he lifts me up and tosses me over his shoulder, banding his arms around my waist and thighs to secure me. I punch and flail, trying my damndest to escape him, but he’s too big; too strong. I’m at his mercy as he begins to carry me away down the dark tunnel.

A chilling wave of dread washes over me as the realization sinks in that this is it. I’m going to die, and there’s nothing I can do to prevent it. There’s no escaping the inevitability.

This is how our story ends.

Death parts us.

My ears ring, my heart thumps. My limp body bounces against his shoulder as he carries me up a set of stairs. A key scrapes in a lock.

He pushes through a door, and suddenly we’re outside, somewhere on the manor grounds. The leaves of the trees rustle in the breeze. The hinges on the old garden gate creak. I lift my head, blinking in confusion at the shadows cast upon the ground

by the crumbling gravestones as he steps out of the mausoleum.

We're in the cemetery.

He's taking me back to my grave.

I've cheated death at his hand many times, so it's no wonder my luck has finally run out. This life was miserable and far too short, but maybe there's something better for me waiting on the other side.

The brittle dirt crunches beneath the soles of his shoes as he carries me past a row of headstones. I wonder if I'll even get one, or if the next Mrs. Volkov will speculate in horror when she sees the fresh grave where he laid me to rest. If I come back as a ghost, perhaps I can warn her somehow. Maybe she can save herself.

I let my eyes slip closed as I give into the inevitability of my fate. That's life, he once said. It always ends in death, the only question is when.

A second set of footsteps starts echoing those of the man carrying me, the other twin joining in the march to my demise. We've been walking for too long, though, and it suddenly dawns on me that we're no longer in the cemetery, but treading across the lawn. A spark of hope bursts forth that perhaps this isn't the end; I've been given one more chance.

The shadow of the manor falls over us as he slows to a stop and bends forward to set me back on my feet, my nipples scraping painfully against his thick shoulder as I slide down his body. My toes sink into the frosty grass, his hands gripping my waist to spin me around.

"Look," he growls into the shell of my ear, then the heat of his body leaves my back as he retreats a step.

I blink chaotically, drawing a sharp gasp when the bloodied corpse on the ground at my feet comes into focus. Jumping backwards in fright, I slap my hands over my face to shield my eyes, my palms muffling my strangled whimper.

“Look at him, Eliza,” the second brother commands as he approaches, his footsteps coming to a stop somewhere just beyond my left shoulder.

“No!” I choke through a sob, pressing my hands tighter to my face. “You killed him!”

“Actually, Knox killed him, but that’s not the point,” he grumbles in response. “Look . His right hand.”

If curiosity killed the cat, nine lives wouldn’t be near enough for me. I’ve expended far more in my quest to unravel the mysteries of the manor, and since I’m still breathing, I need to look.

Slowly, I lower my hands from my face, squinting my eyes open to see the soles of Wesley’s shoes. My gaze travels up the dark denim covering his legs, then slides over to focus on his right hand, the shiny black handle of a gun resting in his palm.

My breath hitches, heart thundering in my chest.

Maybe I still have a chance to change this ending.

Lunging forward, I dive for the gun, ripping it away from Wesley’s lifeless hand and whipping around to turn it on the twins. Neither even so much as flinches. One stares back at me coldly. Roman . The corner of the other’s mouth twitches up in the faintest smirk. Knox .

I put together which was which on the car ride back from their father’s house, matching each persona to their respective demeanors as I observed them. Jekyll likes

me in black and refers to me as wife . Jekyll is Roman. Hyde likes when I wear red and calls me pet . Hyde is Knox.

Keeping the barrel of the gun trained in their direction, moving from one to the other, I slowly push up to my feet. “I need answers,” I tell them, much braver now that I’ve realized my life isn’t in danger. If they wanted to kill me, they would’ve done it back in the cemetery. There’s more to this than I’m missing.

“And we’re prepared to give them to you,” Roman answers flatly. “Let’s go inside and we’ll talk.”

“No, right now ,” I bite out, narrowing my eyes on him. “Tell me what’s going on or I swear I’ll pull the trigger.”

He frowns, the muscle in his jaw feathering with irritation. “Eliza. It’s freezing out here.”

I glare back at him unblinkingly, refusing to relent. For the first time, I hold the power.

It is freezing, though, and as we continue staring one another down, an icy shiver tracks up my spine, making my hands tremble. My adrenaline is ebbing, my body starting to go into shock.

“You can keep the gun,” Knox offers, evidently growing impatient with me and his brother’s staring contest.

“Fine,” I huff, my breath fogging in front of my face as I wave the tip of the handgun toward the manor. “You first. And only because it’s cold.”

Roman finally breaks our eye contact, turning to share a glance with his brother. The

two of them turn and stride toward the front door of the manor, and I follow behind at a comfortable distance, keeping the gun clasped tightly in my hands and the barrel pointed at their backs. They open the door and step through, pausing in the foyer to look back at me as I push the door closed behind me with a shoulder.

“Upstairs, to my room,” I direct, keeping it together remarkably well for how stressed I am. Every muscle in my body is tight with tension, my pulse racing like a hummingbird’s.

Roman and Knox ascend the stairs ahead of me, following the split in the staircase to the left and entering the west wing of the manor. My bedroom is the only place in the house I know like the back of my hand, so going there is akin to giving me the home field advantage in a sporting match. I follow them inside, keeping a healthy distance as I skirt around them to put my back to the windows.

“Explain,” I grit out, my arms aching from the effort of keeping the gun pointed on them.

Roman’s eyes flicker to the weapon. “He brought that because he was here to kill you,” he states bluntly.

“What?” I scoff, scrunching my nose as I flinch back disbelievingly. “No.”

“Why else would he have it?”

“I don’t know, for protection?” I spit, my lips twisting in a scowl. “A lot of good it did him.”

“No, Eliza,” Knox cuts in, prompting me to shift my gaze to his identical face. “Your father sent him.”

My heart pounds harder, slamming against my ribcage. “You’re lying.”

“You’re the one who’s been lied to,” Roman murmurs. “Your father sent you here to die, Eliza. And when we didn’t finish the job, he decided to take matters into his own hands.”

“That’s not true!” I rasp, whipping my head back toward Roman, our gazes colliding. “Wesley said he was here to save me.”

“By putting a bullet in your head,” Knox scoffs. “You’re welcome for saving your life, by the way.”

My eyes ping back over to him. “So you could kill me yourself, like your last wife?” I remark bitterly.

His lips turn down in a frown. “I didn’t kill her.”

“You, then?” I question, glancing back over at Roman.

“No,” he replies flatly. “Alina took her own life.”

My eyes bounce between the two of them as a fresh wave of nausea curls in my gut. “So, what, you just replaced her with me so you two could carry on this twisted game of yours?”

“Of course not, don’t be ridiculous,” Roman mutters.

“No?” I lower the gun, marching over to my desk and yanking the top drawer open. “Then how do you explain this ?” I shout as I reach inside, brandishing the photograph I pilfered from the east wing. “This is her, isn’t it?”

“No,” Roman answers.

“Then who is it?” I demand, holding up the picture in one hand and the gun in the other as I stomp in his direction. “Why does she look like me?”

His brow creases, head tilting in question. “You don’t recognize your own mother?”

30

ROMAN

“M y mother?” Eliza chokes, her lower lip wobbling as tears spring to her eyes.

She’s not in her right mind. Her emotions are changing on a dime, and I can see the warning signs of her impending descent into panic.

This was all too much, too fast. I told Knox we should wait. He didn’t witness the way she fell apart in the study, when I saw the patterns of the past repeating themselves with startling symmetry. Alina succumbed to the same madness that Eliza was able to claw her way out of, but she’s now on a swift descent back in. Her chest is heaving, her delicate body trembling. We need to walk her back from the edge.

“Of course,” I murmur, dipping my chin as I steadily hold her gaze. “You did mention that your father took her photographs down over a decade ago, and she is quite young there. But yes, Eliza. That’s your mother, Anastasia Sorokin.”

She shudders a broken sob, pulling the picture into her chest and staring down at it in awe, a single tear tracking a wet path down her cheek. “Where did you... how did you...?”

My chest tightens uncomfortably as I watch the faltering words fall from her lips. I’ve never experienced this strange, unpleasant twist of sympathy before for another human being. My emotions have always been an empty void, holding no place for compassion or concern. It’s why I was built for the Bratva. But with her ...

Knox wasn't wrong when he said she's different.

That she fits with us.

Both of us.

"When you mentioned the car accident, something you said didn't add up," I say, deliberately keeping my voice at a low, soothing decibel so as not to trigger her stress response. "How the car burst into flames before you hit the pole. You were quite insistent on it."

"So?" she snuffles, jerking her gaze back up to mine.

"So, that would insinuate that it wasn't a tragic accident," Knox cuts in. "Tragic, yes, but accident, certainly not."

I exchange a glance with my brother, a silent understanding passing between us. We've kept her in the dark for far too long. It's finally time to bring her in on every sordid detail of what we've uncovered, and while it won't be pleasant to hear, she deserves the truth.

My wife has proved her strength time and time again. She can handle this.

Eliza wipes her nose off on a wrist, her lower lip still quivering as her eyes flicker between the two of us. "What are you saying, that someone had my mother killed?"

"Yes," Knox replies bluntly.

"Who?"

"Your father," I say.

Her brows pinch inward as her plump lips purse in disbelief. “Why would he do that? He loved my mother, he...”

“Love has no place in this world, Eliza,” I remind her, that disturbing feeling of sympathy tightening my chest again. “Your father cared much more for your mother’s lineage than for her as a person.”

Eliza’s long lashes flutter as she blinks at me in confusion. “Her lineage?”

“The rank he currently holds in the Bratva, the one he inherited from her family line,” Knox explicates.

She shakes her head, wrinkling her nose. “I don’t understand.”

Of course this is confusing for her. It would be for anyone, to learn that everything they thought they knew has been a lie. Beating around the bush won’t make the truth any less difficult to swallow.

“I thought it strange that your father reached out to mine so soon after my ex-wife’s passing,” I murmur, swiping a hand over the rough stubble on my chin. I need a shave. “We’d heard that he already brokered a marriage deal with Ilya Belov, and speculation had been circulating about the circumstances of Alina’s death. I had to ask myself, why would a man who sheltered his daughter, who cherished her so much that he kept her protected her whole life, suddenly be willing to throw her to the wolves? To marry her off to a man he believed had murdered his previous wife? It didn’t make sense. The only explanation was that he wanted to rid himself of you, but I needed to know why .”

Eliza slowly lowers the gun down to her side as she listens intently, hanging on my every word. My pretty little wife is nothing if not inquisitive.

“I’ve had my suspicions about Victor for a long time now, which is why I avoided doing business with him,” I continue. “But when he seemed so desperate to secure our union, I couldn’t pass up an opportunity to exploit his weakness. So, I directed my father to accept the proposal on my behalf. I figured my brother could have his fun with you while I waited to see whether you’d betray any of your family’s secrets. When we found out you weren’t a virgin, it was apparent why the deal fell through with Belov, but it still didn’t explain why Victor would want you dead. Then you mentioned the car catching fire.”

“Once I started pulling at the first thread, Victor’s entire web of lies began to unravel. Back when your mother died, he refused to entertain the idea of foul play, insisting it was an accident. When I discovered it wasn’t, that pointed to him being responsible, but what would motivate a man to murder his wife? I followed the trail backwards, to the string of tragedies that struck your family within a short period of time. First your uncle, who had the misfortune of catching a stray bullet. Then your grandfather’s sudden passing a year after his son, leaving Victor as the male heir to his titles through marriage.”

“But my grandfather had a heart attack,” Eliza blurts, eyes popping wide like she’s shocked to have poked a hole in my theory.

“That’s what his death certificate stated,” I confirm. “But strangely enough, his autopsy report was missing from the file, and the coroner who prepared it also up and disappeared shortly after.” I glance over at my brother. “Knox has an affinity for tracking people down who don’t want to be found. He was able to get his hands on your grandfather’s toxicology screen, which confirmed the heart attack he suffered was the result of poisoning.” I swing my gaze back on Eliza. “After Knox put a little pressure on the coroner, he confessed to accepting a bribe from your father to forge the report and disappear.”

I can practically see the wheels turning in her pretty little head as she rolls her lower

lip between her teeth, brow furrowing. “And my mother?” she asks tentatively.

“I’m guessing that your mother must’ve been curious like you,” I muse. “And when she uncovered the truth of Victor’s treachery, he was forced to rid himself of her or risk being exposed. After you survived that accident, I’m sure he was nervous about what you remembered, but it was too risky for him to pull off yet another and hope to get away with it. So, he kept you close. Decided you’d have value in brokering an alliance through marriage someday.”

“Then why would he suddenly try to kill me now by sending Wesley?” Eliza questions, the pieces evidently still not quite adding up. “How would that benefit your alliance?”

“Because the last time we spoke, I told your father how well our marriage was going,” I admit, another foreign emotion taking root within me. Guilt, for putting her at risk . “I told him you’d been sharing stories about your childhood and remembering things about your mother’s accident. Him sending an assassin in response only further implicates his role in all of this. When he realized we weren’t going to do his dirty work for him and kill you off, he took matters into his own hands.”

Eliza just stands there for a moment, pale and shellshocked as my words slowly settle over her. Learning that her entire life has been a lie can’t be easy to process. F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, “ The loneliest moment in someone's life is when they are watching their whole world fall apart, and all they can do is stare blankly.” If the current state of my wife isn’t the personification of that quote, then I don’t know what is.

“So, he sent me here to die,” she finally murmurs, her voice strained.

I nod solemnly in confirmation.

Her throat bobs with a harsh swallow, wild eyes darting back and forth. “Well, I’ll finish the job for him, then,” she decides, swinging her arm up and pressing the barrel of the handgun to her temple.

“Eliza, no ...” Knox breathes, his knees hitting the hardwood, fingers sinking into his hair.

I’ve never heard such raw desperation in my brother’s voice; never seen him fall to his knees for anyone before. She’s different. He said it himself, and it’s never been more apparent than in this very moment. Like me, Knox has always thought himself incapable of compassion. And like me, this woman has managed to work her way so deep into his system that she’s somehow rewired it. She’s irrevocably altered us both.

“Why not?” she cries out, fresh tears tracking down her face as her trembling index finger moves to rest on the curve of the trigger. “Isn’t this how it ends for us?”

“No ,” I say sternly, jaw straining under the effort it takes to retain my composure . “You’re ours , Eliza. We protect what’s ours.” Holding her eye contact, I begin to move slowly and purposefully across the room in her direction, calmly reaching for the gun. “We won’t let anyone take you from us, not even yourself.”

A shuddered sob racks her body as she allows me to confiscate the weapon, arms falling limply to her sides as I flick on the safety and tuck it into the waistband of my slacks. Eliza crumples to the floor in a heap of sullied chiffon, pulling her knees to her chest and choking on her tears.

Before I can make any move to comfort her, Knox abruptly shoulders past me, stooping down to scoop Eliza’s trembling body up into his arms. It’s a move so unlike him that all I can do is watch in a suspended state of disbelief as he holds her tight to his chest and pushes up to his full height, starting across the room.

Whispering words of reassurance meant for only her ears, Knox carries her over to the bed, lays her down upon it, and presses a kiss to the very temple she just had a gun pressed against. Then, with more care than I've ever seen him exhibit, he situates her beneath the comforter before kicking off his shoes and slipping into bed behind her.

I blow out a slow breath, allowing some of the tension to drain from my muscles now that the threat has passed. Eliza is safe, and I plan to keep her that way. Right now, she needs rest, and it looks like my brother has this well in hand.

I dart one last glance in their direction before striding to the door and slipping out of the room. Closing it quietly behind me, I release a long exhale as I press my back against the polished wood, sliding down to the floor and burying my face in my hands.

That was too close.

Alina was an insufferable narcissist, but neither of us wanted her to die. What happened to her took a toll, and I had no interest in taking another wife for fear that it'd happen again. My cold, dead heart started beating again when she put that gun to her head. It hasn't stopped since, and it now feels like it's going to burst from my chest.

If this is what it's like to truly care for someone, I don't want any part of it. If only I could banish these foreign emotions by sheer will.

I used to think caring for someone meant making their life comfortable, and as much as I abhorred the idea of marrying again, I did that for Eliza. I purchased the finest clothes and beauty products, paid attention to which foods she preferred so we could stock the kitchen with them. I instructed Clara to make sure her morning coffee was to temperature each day so she wouldn't burn the roof of her mouth; one of my

biggest pet peeves. I didn't deny her a single thing.

There's nothing I despise more than feeling out of control. Every aspect of my life is regimented, every detail carefully calibrated. I can no longer control the way I feel for my wife, and as I comb over my memories of our time together, I'm struggling to pinpoint exactly when she became more to me than a business arrangement.

I'm trapped in that endless loop of thoughts when the pressure against my back suddenly slackens, the door slowly opening from inside. I curl forward, glancing up to see my brother standing above me, the exhaustion of the evening etched deeply in his features. He can't resist passing judgment on the position he's found me in, though, raising a dark brow as a smirk touches his lips.

Pushing to my feet, I blow out a measured breath and swivel to face Knox as he pulls the door closed behind him.

"She cried herself to sleep," he mumbles quietly.

I jerk a nod, tipping my head in the direction of the foyer. "Drink?"

Knox snorts a wry laugh, clapping a hand down on my shoulder and leaning in. "Make it a double, brother."

31

ELIZA

I wake to the low hum of voices rumbling outside my door, squinting my heavy lids open to find the interior of my bedroom bathed in the pale glow of moonlight. Pushing against the mattress, I prop myself up on my elbows and swing my gaze around, struggling to discern why this familiar room suddenly appears so strange to me. Slowly, realization begins to dawn that the curtains haven't been pulled over the windows. For the first time, they're open wide, chasing away the dark shadows that usually haunt me here at night.

It's fitting, considering the shroud has also just been pulled from my eyes. After tonight's series of revelations, it's as if I'm finally seeing things clearly for the first time, and they look startlingly different through the lens of truth.

My childhood.

My marriage.

My future.

I suppose that last one is still up to chance, but at least now I know my husband isn't intent on murdering me any time soon. To the contrary, both he and his twin seem to care a great deal about preventing my imminent death. They took out my assassin; took the gun from my trembling hand. Do devils have hearts?

The murmuring voices outside my door abruptly quiet, followed by the metallic grind of the doorknob turning. My breath catches and I flop back down against my pillow, rolling over and pressing my eyes closed to pretend I'm still asleep.

The hinges creak as the door swings open, followed by the familiar clip of dress shoes against the hardwood as someone steps inside and closes it behind them. A single set of footsteps crosses the room toward me, and a little rush of exhilaration has my breath hitching as I consider which twin is here to pay me a visit.

And to think I'd presumed life here at the manor was mundane .

The knowledge that there's two of them brings an extra thrill to every encounter, my heart pounding harder as he nears the bed. His presence alone shifts the energy in the room, his powerful aura demanding my attention. It takes everything in me to resist giving it to him as I regulate my breathing and remain still.

He lets out a long, exhausted-sounding sigh as he comes to a halt beside my bed, then I hear the rustle of clothing as he undresses; feel the dip of the mattress as he climbs in next to me. The familiar scent of his aftershave tickles my nose as he slides in close beneath the covers, banding an arm firmly around my waist and pulling me tight against his chest.

Roman.

I know from the way he holds me— his movements purposeful, his hands firm. His grip is no less demanding than his brother's, but it's decidedly more controlled.

"I'm sorry, Eliza," he mumbles under his breath, the tired exhale that follows ruffling the strands of my hair.

He must think I'm asleep. I'm tempted to continue pretending I am in the hopes he'll

confess what's in that hollow, black heart of his. It's easier for people to speak their truths when they think nobody's listening.

Minutes pass, but sadly, he doesn't utter another word. His exhaustion is evident, while I'm now wide awake, finally thinking more clearly than I have in days— weeks , even. And there are still lingering questions burning in the back of my mind.

Putting my well-honed acting skills to use again, I gently shift my weight with a soft groan, sliding a hand over his resting against my belly. "Roman," I rasp sleepily.

His thumb moves beneath my hand, tracing circles against my skin. "How'd you know it was me?"

"I can tell you apart better than you might think," I muse, still kicking myself for not figuring out the truth about the twins on my own. The subtle distinctions in them are so glaringly obvious to me now. I was on the right track with recognizing two distinct personalities, but I really should've put together that there were two of them all along.

I roll over to face him, the glow of the moon reflecting in his green eyes as I lift a hand and brush the backs of my knuckles over his cheek. "You're the one who reads to me."

"Yes," he confirms.

"And the one who... spans me?" I ask bashfully, a blush rising to my cheeks.

He dips his chin in a nod.

I blow out a breath, pushing up on my elbows and scooching back to rest against the headboard. "Why not just tell me from the beginning?" I question as I reach up to comb my fingers through my tangled hair.

“Because this was never part of the plan,” he murmurs, shifting to sit up beside me.

My brows pinch together as I turn my head his way. “What do you mean?”

He slowly turns to meet my eyes. “Both of us... being with you .”

“What?” I scoff. “It wasn’t like this with your last wife?”

He snorts a laugh, as if my assumption is absurd. “No. I never touched Alina. Knox had his fun with her, but he never formed a real attachment. He’s never formed an attachment to anyone other than me, until you.”

My heart stutters a beat and I almost smile, chewing on my lower lip to cover it. “You truly didn’t kill her?” I ask, even though I’m starting to trust that he didn’t.

“No.”

“Then what happened?”

He swipes a hand over his stubbled chin, brows drawing in. “My brother and I both showed up to dinner one night, about a week after the wedding,” he states. “She didn’t take it well when she realized Knox had been the one playing games with her. She was a strict religious type, said it made her an adulterer and this was a house of sin.” He rolls his eyes, stabbing his fingers through his hair. “She wasn’t fully stable before she arrived here, but that was what set her off. The following day, she threw a chair through the tower window and jumped.”

I wince, sucking in a breath through my teeth. “I’m sorry.”

He scrubs a hand over his face, as if the memory pains him. “We waited to tell you until we thought you were ready because we didn’t want another suicide on our

hands,” he explains. “And as for why we didn’t tell you from the beginning, well, that was my brother’s call. He’s always been different. Volatile, quick to anger. My father suggested long ago that he’d be better suited to working behind the scenes, while I present as the face of our family in business. Not even all our associates know there’s two of us. We’ve been playing this game our whole lives, so it felt natural to continue on as usual with you.”

He cups my chin, running the pad of his thumb over my lower lip. “We never intended to keep you, but circumstances have changed. You can continue plotting your escape, but know that if you do manage to get away, I’ll find you and bring you right back here.” He pauses, fingers tightening their hold as a possessive gleam ignites in his eyes. “Over and over again until you accept that you are mine .”

I feel his claim like a brand, his grip unwavering as he stares me down to drive his point home. “What about Knox?” I ask.

“He enjoys the chase even more than I do,” he replies with a dark chuckle. “But you already know that, don’t you, wife?”

I turn away to hide the blush rising to my cheeks.

This whole situation is ludicrous. I shouldn’t even be entertaining the thought of staying here; of being with both of them. But also... in their own, fucked up way, they’ve done more for me in the short time I’ve known them than anyone else has for the last decade. Not only did they uncover my father’s treachery, but they’ve also tended to my needs; led me to discover parts of myself I never even knew existed. Helped me to embrace the darker parts I’ve always tried to ignore. I haven’t felt this alive since my mother died.

Knox tests my limits, making me recognize crucial parts of myself. He hurts me, but only in the name of pleasure. He breaks me so he can build me back up stronger.

Roman takes control, silencing my swirling, anxious thoughts so I can be present in the moment. He makes me feel safe and protected, possessed and cherished.

They've both taught me that there's peace in pain; beauty in brokenness. And sure, they're complete psychopaths, but I'm no angel either. I've got my fair share of damage. They both seem to care about me in whatever capacity they're capable of, and that's all I've ever really wanted— for someone, anyone to care enough to actually see me.

I know Knox sees me, and I think Roman's finally starting to. These monsters push me to the edge, but they always manage to pull me back from it, as if our broken pieces just fit together.

"We need to get you out of this dress," Roman orders, his lip curling as he rubs the soiled fabric between his fingers.

"Why, you don't like it?" I ask innocently, batting my lashes at him.

"It's filthy," he grumbles, his evergreen gaze lifting to mine. "But before it became that way, you looked exquisite in it."

My pulse flutters, heat rising to my cheeks.

"Will you help me get it off?" I ask.

He dips his chin in a nod. "Of course."

The two of us climb out of bed, Roman circling around to my side. I spin around and put my back to him, gathering my hair over a shoulder as my pulse kicks up a notch with nervous anticipation. He reaches for my zipper, and a shiver skates up my spine as he slowly drags it down over the curve of my ass, goosebumps pebbling up on the

exposed skin of my back. He peels the fabric away from my body and I step out of it, acutely feeling the weight of his stare as I slip off my bra and panties before turning back around to face him.

Roman's gaze turns molten as it combs over my naked form. He steps closer, taking my hand and leading me to the edge of the bed. Urging me down to rest on the edge, he says he'll be right back, pacing over to the bathroom and returning with a damp cloth in hand. Even though it's warm, goosebumps pebble up on my chest as he glides it across my dirty skin, washing away the blood and grime.

Now I know the bath wasn't a dream. The strokes of the cloth under his hand are achingly familiar, echoing the way he did it before. Not only that, but each pass has my core tightening, thighs quivering with need as a steady throb pulses to life between them.

"Touch me, Roman," I breathe, peering up at him through my eyelashes.

He tosses the cloth aside, his hands coming back to my body. Sliding them down to part my thighs, he trails one closer to the apex until his thumb lands on my clit. I suck in a gasp, as he starts rubbing it in circles, catching myself on my palms as I fall back with a soft moan.

Increasing the pressure, he coaxes another moan to fall from my lips, the tension of the day slowly ebbing from my body. Then the faintest creak in the floorboards makes me stiffen, and I jerk my head toward the corner of my room, where the shadow lingers late at night. It's usually shrouded with such darkness that I can't see anything, but with the expanse of moonlight shining in through the unobstructed windows, I can make out the seams of a hidden door concealed in the wall as it swings open, allowing my husband's twin to slip into the room.

Knox lifts his gaze as he pushes it closed behind him, our eyes locking.

“You’re my shadow,” I declare on a breathy exhale.

The corner of his mouth kicks up with a sly grin as he nods. “Always watching.”

A strange rush of titillation surges through me. I’d come to terms with the idea of the manor’s ghosts keeping watch over me at night, but now I know it was him all along. It’s a violation of my privacy; a twisted way to keep me under their thumb... and yet, something about his confession has my heart pounding faster, heat pooling in my core.

Or maybe that’s just from what Roman’s doing between my legs. He’s not paying his brother any mind as he strides toward us, pumping a finger in and out of me as he rubs my clit. Knox approaches the bed, gaze dropping to the apex of my thighs. His nostrils flare, jaw tightening, and I reach out for his hand, brushing my thumb over the scabbed cut on his palm before tightening my fingers and pulling him in to join us.

Only then does Roman withdraw his touch from between my legs, large hands gripping my waist as he lifts me up and moves me to the center of the bed while Knox sheds his clothes. Roman presses against my shoulder, laying me down as Knox circles the bed and climbs up on my other side. They both reach for me at the same time, and I suppress a shiver as two sets of hands roam my body, slowly exploring every inch, as if they’re staking their claim. The sensation is overwhelming, every nerve ending alight as I crave each brush of their palms. My reaction is visceral, the feeling so familiar that a lightbulb goes off in my brain.

I lift my head, eyes popping wide. “That night with the blindfold?” I gasp.

Knox gives me a cunning grin of confirmation. “It’s better that you know now so we can both take you together, stuff you full of your husbands’ cocks.”

“B-both?” I stammer, apprehension curling in my gut.

“Yes, pet,” he chuckles darkly, delving his hand between my thighs and spreading my slickness from my opening to my back hole. “Both of us. You’re ours.” He pauses, narrowing his eyes. “Or have you forgotten who you belong to?”

“Perhaps we need to remind her,” Roman suggests with a deviant smirk.

Even if I wanted to, Knox doesn’t give me a chance to object, flipping me over onto my belly and banding an arm around my hips to pull me up onto all fours. Roman shoves down his boxers and moves to his knees in front of me, his thick cock at eye level as he pumps it in his fist. I blink up at him demurely, tongue darting out to wet my lips as Knox’s hands grip onto the front of my thighs and his warm breath fans my center. My lips part with a gasp as his broad tongue licks into me, and Roman seizes the opportunity to thrust his cock past them, sinking a hand into my hair as he thrusts down my throat.

My toes curl as Knox teases my clit with the tip of his tongue, nipping it with his teeth before suctioning his lips over the sensitive bud. I hum around Romans length as he pumps in and out of my mouth, my scalp prickling as his fingers tighten their grip on my hair. He mutters a strained curse as I hollow out my cheeks and suck harder, choking as the head of his dick bumps the back of my throat. Knox’s skilled tongue laps against my center while I trace my own around Romans shaft, the building pressure in my core making my thighs quake.

The salty taste of precum slides over my tongue as Knox withdraws his mouth and shifts around behind me. Curiosity and anticipation mingle as I attempt to turn my head, but then Roman pulls out of my mouth, sliding a finger gently beneath my chin and tipping it up. “Eyes on me while he fucks you, wife.”

My stomach bottoms out, my throat tightening with apprehension as I blink up at

him. My mind's reeling, heart racing, but all my tension ebbs away when the head of Knox's cock nudges my entrance and he slides into me from behind. I cry out, the sound of it muffled as Roman thrusts back into my mouth. My lips seal around his shaft as Knox starts hammering into me, forcing me to swallow his brother deeper with every harsh snap of his hips.

"Such a good girl, taking both of our cocks like this," Knox praises, curling an arm under my hips to pinch my clit. "My perfect little pet."

Roman twists my hair around his hand like a rope, arching my neck as he tugs until my eyes meet his. "She loves it. Don't you, wife?"

A strangled gasp is all I can manage as he rolls his hips, his tip punching the back of my throat. Even as I choke around Roman's girth, my pussy slickens with desire as Knox pounds in and out with wild abandon, driving me closer to the edge of bliss.

The two of them alternate their thrusts as they fuck me from both ends, Knox driving forward when Roman draws back, the twins working in tandem to deliver both rapture and ruin. I whimper around Roman's cock as Knox's motions suddenly pause, the cold sensation of lube dribbling between my cheeks sending a flurry of chills racing across my skin. His thumb swirls it around my back hole, easing it inside, and I shudder a sharp gasp around Roman's dick that has me swallowing him deeper.

"Fuck ," he hisses, fingers tightening in the strands of my hair.

I relax my muscles to let Knox in my ass, moaning as he starts pumping his thumb in and out. He adds more lube, pressing a second finger past the ring of muscle to stretch me, the coil in my belly winding tight again as he buries himself in my pussy while Roman savagely fucks my face, saliva dribbling down my chin.

"She can take more, can't you, Eliza?" Roman asks, arching a devilish brow.

I blink up at him in a daze as he pulls out of my mouth, dropping down to sit on the bed and hauling me up onto his lap. My nipples scrape across his muscular chest as he positions my body to straddle his waist, lining his tip up with my opening and sinking inside. I moan at the stretch, flinging my arms around his neck and holding on tight while he pushes in deeper, filling me up. His fingers sink into the soft flesh of my hips to direct my movements, bouncing me up and down on his length, then I feel Knox move in close behind me, my pulse taking off at a gallop. His hands start kneading my ass cheeks, the velvety crown of his cock gliding between them.

“Deep breath, wife. You can take it,” Roman coaxes, stilling his own movements as Knox starts pressing against my back hole.

The air rushes from my lungs as he inches inside, the feeling of fullness unlike anything I ever could’ve anticipated or imagined. My fingernails dig into the flesh of Roman’s thick shoulders, my breath coming out in short pants as Knox rocks in and out, sinking deeper with each languid stroke until his hips press against my ass as he sheathes himself completely. Intense pleasure riots through my veins, eyes rolling back as Roman rolls his hips and they both start moving inside me. One retreats as the other thrusts, alternating their rhythm, stretching and filling me like never before. Friction builds between my clit and Roman’s groin with every deep grind from Knox, my legs shaking, breath coming out in short pants.

They’re both so big , but as the pressure builds, pain blurs to pleasure, pushing me to the edge of oblivion. My orgasm barrels down on me like an impending storm, pussy and ass clenching around them as their names fall from my lips like a prayer. So good . I never could’ve imagined it’d be this good to be pinned between them as they ruthlessly fuck both of my holes. The twins’ muscles tense and strain beneath their sweat-slicked skin as they press me tighter between their bodies, their thrusts turning wilder as we all race to the edge of release.

I’m the first to leap from the cliff, both men groaning as my body clenches around

them and I cry out in ecstasy. A heartbeat later, they both follow almost in perfect synchronicity, their dicks swelling inside me and the heat of their cum filling me.

Knox wraps a hand around the column of my neck, fingers flexing as he wrenches my head sideways and pulls my mouth to his. I gasp against his lips, pulse fluttering as he licks past the seam of my own, solidifying his claim over me with a filthy hot kiss.

Roman circles his tongue around my nipple, as his brother ravages my mouth, and the moment Knox releases me, Roman grabs me by the face, turning it toward his and crushing his lips against mine.

What was it I said before, about kissing being too intimate?

Because kissing often leads to feelings, and this was supposed to be purely transactional.

But it isn't .

Not anymore.

32

KNOX

“So which one of you fucked the waitress?” Eliza asks, peeking over the top of the book in her hands.

We’re lounging in the study, rain pounding against the oversized window panes as a storm rages outside. There’s a fire in the hearth to chase away the chill, and my pussy-whipped brother allowed Eliza to bring the dogs inside, the two of them curled at her feet as she rests sideways against the arm of the leather sofa opposite me. Roman is positioned on the couch across from us, and at her question, he lowers his own book with a frown.

“When?”

“That first dinner with Anton and Cherie,” she clarifies.

My brother cuts me a glare, stress tightening his jaw. “You told her I fucked the waitress?” he grits out.

I shrug innocently, fighting back a smirk. How was I to know he hadn’t fucked her?

Fine, I was almost positive he didn’t, since I actually know the man, but I couldn’t be sure he wasn’t playing his own game, and far be it for me to interfere if he was. He knows better than to tread on my games, so I was simply paying him the same courtesy.

Roman swings his gaze back over to Eliza. “I didn’t fuck the waitress,” he deadpans.

“You didn’t?” she asks, surprise coloring her features as her brows shoot up to her hairline. “But that’s obviously why she invited you to the wine cellar, and you were gone for a while...”

“To select a decent bottle,” he scoffs. “You think I’m that easily seduced?”

Her lips slowly spread into a smug grin, gaze flickering askance. “Well, I mean...”

Roman tosses his book down on the cushion beside him and pushes up from the sofa, advancing on her with a predatory gleam in his eye.

Nox suddenly perks up from his post at Eliza’s feet, the hair on the back of his neck bristling as he stares his master down, upper lip curling back from his teeth in a snarl. My brother snaps his fingers to call him off, but in a strange twist of events, the dog doesn’t react to his command. To the contrary, Nox growls even louder at him in warning, keeping himself planted firmly in front of Eliza to block Roman’s advance. Interesting.

“Ryadom !” Roman snaps irritably. Heel in Russian.

Nox snaps his teeth, barking at him.

Roman huffs out an annoyed breath, looking to me for assistance. “Tell your dog to move.”

“You think he’ll listen to me?” I snort, arching a brow. “We both know he’s always preferred you.”

“Well now he prefers her ,” Roman grumbles, tipping his head toward Eliza.

“Molodets,” I chuckle. Good boy.

A mischievous expression comes over Eliza’s face as she flips her book closed, setting it aside and looking down at Nox. She raises a hand, snapping her fingers, and Nox immediately heeds her command, slinking back with a whine and turning to lick her palm.

A smug grin creases her lips as she lifts her gaze to Roman, and something akin to pride sparks inside me at her victory. That’s my girl.

“We’ll see if they remember who they answer to after spending some time locked up in the kennels,” Roman grumbles, huffing out another breath as he retreats back over to the other couch and flops down on it with a grunt.

“Don’t bother, she’s got my skeleton key,” I murmur as I lean back to scroll on my phone.

Eliza’s eyes pop wide, her head snapping in my direction.

I lift my gaze from my phone to meet hers. “Did you honestly think I wasn’t aware you swiped it from my room that night?”

“Did you just say skeleton key?” she asks, bypassing my question with one of her own.

“Yes, it unlocks every door on the estate,” I reply.

She throws herself back against the cushions with a groan, scrubbing her hands down her face. “Why didn’t I think to try it in other doors? I thought it was a key to the tower!”

“Are you encouraging theft now?” Roman mumbles, arching a brow at me disapprovingly.

Come to think of it, I might’ve forgotten to mention the key to him.

I shrug in dismissal. “More places for her to hide only ups the stakes of the game, brother. You know I live for a good hunt.” I slide Eliza a wink, her cheeks flushing pink.

She likes the game, too.

She’d never tarnish that prissy good-girl persona of hers by actually saying it out loud, but some part of her is just as twisted as I am, and I get hard just thinking about her sinister side. The side of her that thrives on pain; that revels in degradation. The one that joins me in the darkness so our demons can dance together to their own malevolent tune. She’s passed every test I’ve put her through thus far with flying colors, but now there’s only one final measure of her true potential.

“What do you want to do about Victor?” I question, perceiving her slight flinch at the mention of his name.

“What do you mean?” she asks hesitantly.

“How do you want him to be punished for what he’s done?” Roman interjects, flickering me a glance that conveys he knows exactly what I’m getting at— and his doubt as to whether she’ll provide the answer I desire. His eyes refocus on Eliza as he asks, “Do you think he deserves death?”

She worries her lower lip between her teeth, a little crease forming between her brows. “Are you saying you’ll kill him for me?”

My brother gives her a shallow nod.

She returns the gesture, as if she was expecting that response. No surprise, given she grew up in this world. She knew exactly what type of family she was marrying into.

Well, not exactly . We did catch her off guard by revealing there were two of us, but there wasn't any point in leading with that when Roman had no intention of getting close to her. Neither of us did; I was only in it for the exhilaration of the games we played together, even when I realized she was starting to play me, too.

I'm still not sure who bested who.

"He shouldn't be able to live after what he's done," Eliza muses angrily.

"Then you'll kill him," I say flatly, bringing my ankle up to rest on my opposite knee.

She whips her gaze in my direction, eyes widening. "Me?"

"This revenge is yours to take, is it not?" I challenge.

She draws a measured breath, brows knitting together as she considers, my brother and I sharing another glance. He still thinks Eliza is soft and delicate; that she won't want to do this. I think she's got more in her than either of us initially gave her credit for.

"Okay, I'll do it," she finally declares, throat bobbing as she lifts her chin with false bravado, eyes flickering between the two of us. "For my mother."

"Glad we're agreed on that," I quip, tossing my phone down on the cushion between us. "I already had Lev dig the grave, right after I got that tox report. I'm sure you remember it, don't you, pet?"

Eliza's cheeks redden, her breath hitching.

I think she enjoyed our time in that grave almost as much as I did.

"We'll go to the top with this and get approval for the execution first," Roman says sternly, giving me a pointed look.

"Of course," I nod, stroking a hand over my chin. "Then we just need a scene for it, and I have the perfect one in mind..."

They both look to me expectantly.

"We never had a wedding reception, and we do have a ballroom," I point out, glancing from Eliza to my brother. "Don't you think it'd be appropriate to officially introduce her as ours now that we're intent on keeping her?"

"I can't be both your wives," she scoffs, shaking her head.

I look her way, our eyes locking. "You can be whatever you like."

"Free?" she asks hopefully.

"Except that," I growl, leveling her with an icy glare. "We'll secure the order, invite your father, and you avenge your mother by sinking a knife into his heart." I shrug a shoulder as I turn to my brother. "Simple. Clean."

"What makes you think he'll come?" Eliza asks dubiously.

"Because he doesn't know we've dug up the proof to expose him," Roman answers. "And Victor won't pass on the opportunity to rub elbows with so many powerful people in one room."

She nods slowly, still seemingly unsure.

“In the meantime, we’ll prepare you for what needs to be done,” I tell her, a ripple of excitement simmering in my veins at the promise of violence.

Eliza has always looked stunning in red, after all.

33

ELIZA

The gentle lilt of orchestral music underscores the lively chatter as more of our guests spill into the manor's ballroom through the wide double-doors, finely dressed and eager to mingle. This party would probably be a lot more fun if I actually knew more than a handful of the people in this room, but then again, even if I did, I doubt I'd be able to let loose and enjoy it. My palms are sweating, my stomach in knots, and even though I'm trying not to, I keep looking toward those doors with trepidation as I await my father's arrival.

"So you're with both of them?" Cherie asks, prompting me to return my attention to her.

"Yeah, I guess I am," I reply sheepishly, taking a small sip of my champagne. "I know it's a little unconventional, but..."

"Girl, that's hot as fuck," she blurts, tossing her dark hair back and fanning herself with her designer clutch. "I'm jealous. Landing one Volkov brother is like hitting the lottery, but both?"

"Yeah, about that," I murmur, narrowing my eyes. "Why didn't you ever mention that Roman had an identical twin?"

She flinches back, wrinkling her nose. "Didn't I?"

“No, you definitely didn’t,” I deadpan.

Cherie shrugs, her plump lips curling into a smile. “Well hey, you were the one living with them, it was a fair assumption you knew!”

Anton comes up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and hooking his chin over her shoulder. “Come, malishka , I want to introduce you to someone,” he croons in her ear, her mouth splitting into a wide grin.

“You go,” I say, tossing back the rest of my champagne and brandishing the empty glass. “I’m gonna grab another drink.”

As Anton whisks Cherie across the room, I head for the nearest bar, swiping another full glass of champagne from a tray on the side and abandoning my empty flute. I turn back around and smile when I spot Niko approaching, sharply dressed in a black tuxedo with a stunning redhead on his arm.

“Good evening, Mrs. Volkov,” he greets with a respectful tip of his head.

“Good evening, Niko,” I reply, my smile deepening as I nod to his date. “Who’s the pretty girl?”

“Allow me to introduce you to my fiancé, Saskia,” he declares.

“Fiancé?” I echo, arching a brow as I extend a hand in her direction. “You are a very lucky woman.”

“I’m the lucky one,” Niko says with a grin, gazing down at her adoringly as the two of us shake hands.

In hindsight, it never would’ve worked with him. He’s too sweet. As it turns out, I

prefer hand necklaces over pearls.

After exchanging pleasantries with the two of them, I meander through the crowd, keeping a watchful eye on the doorway as I pace the room. My father should've been here by now. The party started half an hour ago, and he's nothing short of punctual.

What if someone tipped him off?

"Where have you been, wife?" Roman growls as he comes up behind me, banding an arm around my waist and yanking me back into his chest.

"Making out with that guy," I joke, tipping my champagne glass in the direction of a handsome stranger.

Roman releases his grip around my waist, turning me to face him. "I sincerely hope you didn't do anything with him," he says, pinning me with a harsh stare.

"And what if I did?" I challenge, lifting my chin as I raise my champagne flute to my lips. "He's hot." I take a sip, knowing I'm playing with fire and craving the burn.

"He's your second cousin."

I spit out my champagne, coughing and sputtering as I wipe at my mouth with a wrist.

The corner of Roman's mouth ticks up in amusement as he watches me struggle to recover my composure. "He's the next blood relative in the Sorokin line, so he'll be taking your father's place after tonight," he informs me as I smooth my hair and draw a deep breath.

"About that," I murmur, stepping in closer and peering up at him through my eyelashes. "Are you sure he's coming?"

“Trust me, he won’t miss it. If not for networking, then for the opportunity to finish what he sent his lawn boy here to do. He’s as paranoid as he is greedy. And speaking of...” Roman’s gaze lifts as he trails off.

I immediately whip around to look toward the doors, my father strolling over the threshold and into the ballroom with his beast of a second at his back. Vlad is intimidating to look at— a former professional fighter, stacked with muscle— but he’s as dumb as he is massive. Though he’s trained to kill and is really more of a bodyguard than a second-in-command, he’s no match for my men.

My father’s dark, calculating eyes scan over the room, a brittle smile creasing his lips as he spots me and begins striding in my direction.

I glance up at Roman, realizing that he’s looking in the opposite direction, making eye contact with someone across the room. Knox . I follow his gaze, and sure enough, Mr. Hyde is weaving his way through the crowd, already bound for us.

I turn my head back around right as my father approaches, my heart stuttering a beat.

“Eliza,” he breathes, feigning fondness as he reaches for my hands. His fingers are cold as he grips onto mine, and I suppress a shiver as he pulls me in and presses a disingenuous kiss to my cheek. “I’ve missed you,” he says as he pulls back, giving me a once-over. “You look... healthy .”

He’s calling me fat.

My cheeks flame and an arm drapes over my shoulder, tucking my body in against a very familiar broad frame. “She’s finally getting proper nutrition. Will be good for bearing the Volkov heirs.”

I snap my head up to gape at Knox, who just smirks and gives me a subtle wink.

Straightening the lapels of his expensive black jacket, my father clears his throat to demand our attention. "I'd like to speak with you," he remarks. "In private."

"Of course," I say, forcing a smile as I slip into the role I'll be playing this evening. The first step of the plan is getting him alone, so it's officially in motion. "We can go to the study," I suggest, gesturing for the twins to join me as I turn to leave.

My father leans in close, setting a hand on my arm and pressing his lips into a thin line. "I was hoping it'd be just the two of us," he murmurs.

"Anything we speak about will be shared with my husbands, so they might as well come too," I reply dismissively.

I don't miss the way he flinches when I say husbands , plural.

Before he can object again, I pivot on a heel and start for the doors, my father hurriedly waving for Vlad to follow him as he trails after me and the twins.

The sounds of revelry spill out from the ballroom into the adjoining corridor as we turn down it, my heels clicking against the marble tile as I lead the way to the study. My heart pounds harder with every step, my mind racing.

Can I really go through with this?

I suppose I won't know until it comes time to plunge the knife into my father's chest.

The five of us enter the study and Roman closes the doors to seal us inside, the tension in the room ramping up with the snick of the latch. I pace over to the sofas near the fire, gesturing for my father to take a seat, while Knox and Vlad linger near the door and Roman takes up a post at the bar cart.

“So the rumors are true?” my father questions, his upper lip curling in disgust as his eyes flicker back and forth between my men. “You’re with both of them?”

“My marriage is none of your concern,” I say dryly, easing down to sit on the edge of the sofa opposite him. “It stopped being your business when you decided alliances were more important than your only child’s happiness.”

“That was clearly a mistake,” he grinds out. “Marriage vows are sacred, and your husband’s willingness to whore you out to his brother only proves that he isn’t a man of his word.”

“And neither are you, it seems,” Roman cuts in, striding over with a glass of vodka in hand. “I was under the impression I was getting a docile, virgin bride.”

“You probably want a refund then, huh?” I ask with a titter of amusement, glancing up at him.

The corner of his mouth lifts as he gazes back at me. “I still think I got the better end of the deal, wife .”

My heart skips a beat and I turn back to my father, finding him staring at the scars marring my left bicep, on full display in my strapless gown. “Something you want to say?” I probe.

His eyes bounce back up to mine. “You should really take advantage of sleeves,” he mutters. “That thing is unsightly.”

“Right, you don’t like looking at it because it reminds you of the pain of losing my mother,” I muse.

The muscle in his jaw feathers as he nods.

I cock my head. “Or is it because it reminds you of your own failure?”

His brows pinch together, lips screwing up in a scowl. “What are you talking about?”

I heave a sigh, rising to my feet and pacing toward the bookshelves. “It’s funny that you should mention the sanctity of marriage vows. What is it that they say, again?” My heels click against the floor as I walk along the row of shelves, reaching out to trail my fingers over the spines of the books resting upon them. “To have and to hold, for better, for worse... for richer, for poorer... in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish...” I recite, pausing as I reach the end of the row. “Till death do you part.”

“What are you going on about?” my father scoffs, his upper lip curling in scorn as I whip back around to face him.

“Tell me, father, where in your vows was there a pardon for murder?” I demand, marching back toward him. “Of a wife, of a daughter...”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he mutters.

“No?” I scoff. “Isn’t that why you came here tonight? To finish the job that Wesley couldn’t?”

“Who?” he questions, flinching back with a grimace. “The lawn boy you spread your legs for?”

I must’ve gotten my acting abilities from him, because my father’s putting on a convincing performance right now. If I didn’t know him so well, I’d miss the subtle tick in his movements, the shift in his posture.

“Eliza, you’re clearly unwell,” he sighs, pushing up to his feet. “Perhaps you should come back home so I can get you the proper care you need.”

“My wife isn’t going anywhere,” Roman bites out, taking a threatening step toward my father. “This is her home now, and she is very well cared for, isn’t she, brother?”

“I cared for her twice just this morning,” Knox snickers.

My father makes a scoffing sound in his throat, face screwing up in revulsion as he looks between the twins. Then he sets his sights on me again and starts in my direction. “Eliza...”

“Don’t,” I snap, holding up a hand to halt his advance. “Don’t come near me.”

His eyes go wide. “How can you treat your father this way?” he pouts, voice softening to feign injury.

“What kind of father would want to murder his own daughter?” I fire back angrily.

He shakes his head, evidently giving up on acting as his scowl returns. “This is absurd.”

“Your time is up, Victor,” Roman cuts in, stepping between us. “We know everything. Your wife, Anastasia Sorokin. Her father, Dimitri Sorokin. Abram, too.”

He waves a hand dismissively. “All tragic accidents.”

“That you set into motion,” Roman growls.

A wraith of a smile crosses my father’s lips. “Prove it.”

“We already have, and now there’s an execution order on your head,” Knox informs him, still holding his post at the door. “Boss agreed to let us do the honors, wasn’t that generous of him?”

“We’re leaving,” my father huffs, calling out for his second as he turns for the door. “Vlad!”

The moment he utters his name, Knox is slicing Vlad’s throat, blood spraying from the gash in his neck like a sieve, splashing onto the black marble floors below him as he collapses.

My father pales, eyes bouncing between my men, the exits they’re blocking his path to, and his henchman’s slumped form bleeding out on the ground. I can practically see the wheels in his head turning as he frantically considers his next move, seemingly deciding when his eyes land on me and he lunges forward.

I’m ready for him. My fingertips graze the slit in my dress, slipping inside and curling around the hilt of the knife in my thigh holster. Our guests’ weapons were confiscated at the door tonight, but we’ve got ours. I whip out the blade, bringing it up between us and pointing the tip in his direction.

He immediately balks, holding up his hands in surrender. “Eliza, sweetheart , they’re manipulating you,” he rushes out, swallowing thickly. “None of this is true.”

“That’s rich, considering you manipulated me my entire life,” I reply coldly, advancing toward him with the knife in hand. “You belittled me. Abused me. Never spared me an ounce of affection. Then sold me off with the hope I’d be slaughtered by my husband.”

He slowly backs away down the row of bookshelves, shaking his head. “None of that is true, I swear,” he insists, a sharp edge of desperation in his tone.

“You always were a better liar than a father,” I grumble wryly, stopping in front of the bookshelf that functions as the hidden door to the tunnels. “Tell you what,” I say as I reach over to pull on it, the hinges creaking as the door swings wide. “I’ll do you

a kindness you never gave me. I'll give you a five-minute head start."

He blanches as he looks down the dark stone stairwell, breath catching in fear.

"Time starts now," I wink.

My father sputters, looking around wildly in search for some way out of this situation. All he finds is Knox at the back door, inviting the dogs in to join in our little murder party.

My father has always hated dogs.

He pivots around frantically, stammering incoherently before rushing for the door and running down the stairs into the subterranean tunnels. The dogs trot over and I crouch down to greet them with scratches and praise as I hear the pounding of my father's footsteps reverberating from below as they recede in the distance. Then I push up to my feet, smiling down at my furry friends.

"Aport ," I say as I point down the staircase, repeating the command Knox taught me. Fetch .

The two of them take off with excited barks, a smile coming to my lips as they set off to chase my father down in the labyrinth of tunnels.

"You did well," Knox murmurs as both he and Roman gravitate toward me. "But are you really going to give him five minutes? In case you've forgotten, we're hosting a party in the other room."

I scowl back at him, pointing the tip of my knife in his direction. "Didn't you say this was my revenge to dole out?"

He cracks a smile.

“Let’s go,” I say, gathering the skirt of my gown up in a hand and turning for the stairs.

It’s funny, last time I was down here I was terrified, running for my life. Now my father’s the one running scared in the dark, and there’s something exciting about being on the other end of the hunt. I think I finally understand the nuances of Knox’s warped psyche, because the rush I get as I descend the cold stone staircase is exquisite.

The twins follow me down, the three of us splitting up and Roman calling off the dogs so we can begin our own hunt. They promised they’d leave the kill to me, but it only seemed fair to let them get something out of this, too. And they do have an affinity for lurking in the dark and terrifying their victims.

The tunnels are just as dark and disorienting as I remember, but since I’m not in a panic this time my senses are sharp, my footsteps measured. Adrenaline roars through my veins as I weave my way through them, searching for any sign of my prey.

I find him quicker than I expect to. Following the sound of his labored grunts, I squint through the darkness to see him crawling on the ground, leaving a trail of blood like a snail behind him. His foot is twisted unnaturally, bone protruding from a rip in his slacks.

“I thought I told you to leave this to me?” I groan, knowing the man responsible for my father’s injury is lurking somewhere nearby.

“It was taking too long, I want to get back to our party,” Knox grumbles as he prowls up behind me, one hand landing possessively on my hip and the other flicking on his phone, turning on the flashlight to illuminate my father’s pathetic form.

He rolls to his back, his chest heaving and his once polished suit askew. “Eliza, please, you don’t want to do this...” he pants, voice hoarse with trepidation.

“You’re wrong, father,” I exhale bitterly. “I’ve wanted nothing more for a long time now; long before I learned you murdered my mother. Every time you made a comment about my scar. Or what I was eating. Or took out your anger on me and left bruises on my skin.” I finger the blade of my knife, turning it over in my palm as I stand over him. “Confess, and I’ll make this quick.”

“This isn’t you,” he rasps.

“Show him who you really are, Eliza,” Knox urges as he taps my butt in encouragement, a lilt of wicked excitement in his tone.

I sweep my arm above my head as I drop to a knee beside my father’s prone body, driving the blade into the meat of his thigh. “Confess!”

He cries out in pain, warm blood splattering my chest as I pull the knife free and pointing the tip at his face.

“Fine, I did it!” he snarls, clutching at the wound in his thigh as he curls upright. “I’m the only one who possessed any ambition in this family, so I did what had to be done to clear the way for my own ascension to power.”

“But why Eliza?” Roman cuts in, appearing from the other end of the tunnel and advancing toward us. “She was just a child.”

“She was a woman ,” my father scoffs. “Not a real heir. Not a son . She was nothing more than a nuisance. Always getting into trouble, then whining and sniveling when she was punished. And now look what she’s become.” He looks up at me, wrinkling his nose in distaste.

“An avenging angel,” Roman murmurs.

“A queen ,” Knox declares.

My lips curve into a grin as I glance between my men, a fresh wave of confidence surging through me as I lift the blade. Then I look down at my father, right into his cruel, soulless eyes as I plunge it down into the center of his chest.

He cries out, but once I start, I can’t stop. The knife makes a squelching sound against his skin as I pull it back, then plunge it in again, blood spraying from his wounds, sullyng his white dress shirt. With every swing of the blade, I recall a time he hurt me, paying it forward by inflicting pain on him as he has on me.

The life ebbs out of his eyes, his strained shouts for mercy quieting until he’s nothing but a bloody carcass on the floor. I finally stop stabbing at his chest, pulling the knife back one last time before my arms fall limply at my sides.

As I stare down at his lifeless body, it hits me that I should feel sorrow or remorse for ending my father’s life. Instead, all I feel is an overwhelming sense of relief that I’ve succeeded in vanquishing the true villain in my story.

I take a deep breath, releasing it as I push to stand. I spare him one last look, but I still can’t find it in me to feel guilt for what I’ve done. I’m surprisingly at peace.

Wiping the blade off on the skirt of my gown, I return it to the sheath in my thigh holster, rising to stand on shaky legs.

“So, back to the party?” I ask, tucking a damp tendril of hair behind my ear.

Roman and Knox exchange glances.

“What?”

“There’s blood on your gown,” Knox points out, an unmistakable smolder of heat in his gaze as he takes in my appearance.

“Then it’s a good thing you like red,” I say, patting his chest as I step past him. The clip of my heels echoes in the tunnel as I stride away from the twins, back in the direction we came from. “Come on, I want to dance with my husbands!”

I smile at the sound of their uniform footsteps as they start to follow.

34

“S eriously, great party,” Cherie titters, leaning her body weight against her husband as he reclines back against the sofa in the study, fingers flexing their grip on her thigh.

A fire is roaring in the hearth, warming the room and bathing the interior in a pale orange glow. The last of our party guests left half an hour ago, save for these two, and we’re all a little fuzzy from the liquor, lounging here in an effort to wind down from the high of a raucous evening.

“It was alright,” Knox mumbles from his seat beside me on the sofa opposite theirs. “Certain parts of it were definitely memorable.”

He slides me a sly wink and my cheeks heat, my gaze pinging to the fire as my throat bobs with a hard swallow.

I’m still waiting for the gravity of what I’ve done to sink in; for guilt to take hold. I’m nervously anticipating how I’ll react when it finally registers, holding my breath like I’ve done every day at the manor while thinking my husband was plotting my murder. My own death hasn’t come yet, and neither has the remorse I should feel for executing my own father. I hope it never does.

“You two are welcome to stay the night, if you’d like,” Roman offers, glass clinking as he pours himself a drink at the bar cart across the room. “We’ve got plenty of space here.”

“Maybe we should head to a guest room, then,” Cherie suggests, rubbing her ass against Anton’s lap suggestively.

“But what if I want to take you right here, by the fire?” he questions, arching a dark brow.

An airy giggle floats from her lips, Anton’s eyes gleaming with a night’s worth of liquor as he pushes down the straps of her dress.

“Anton!” she squeals, holding the fabric tight to her chest so her breasts don’t spill from the top. Embarrassment colors her cheeks as she glances our way, mouthing an apology.

“Hey, don’t stop on our account,” Knox remarks cavalierly, swirling the vodka around his glass.

Anton grins deviously in response to getting the green light, shoving the top of his wife’s dress down to her waist and fully exposing her breasts. I avert my eyes as a flush heats my own cheeks, but within seconds I find myself glancing back over, watching in rapt fascination as he kneads her full breasts beneath his palms.

Those things have got to be implants. Not only are Cherie’s boobs huge on her frame, but they’re perfectly symmetrical and perky. They’re gorgeous.

An uncomfortable feeling of inadequacy stirs within me, but Knox reaches for me before it can fully take hold, pulling me over onto his own lap. He repositions me to his liking with my back against his chest and my legs draped between his, sliding a hand beneath the slit in the skirt of my dress to grip my thigh.

“Do you want to watch?” he murmurs in a low voice, warm breath skating across the shell of my ear.

My heart pounds harder, a thrill rushing through me as goosebumps pebble up on my skin.

Do I?

“Yes,” I answer, my voice barely above a whisper.

I feel his smile against my ear as he leisurely trails his hand higher up my thigh, cupping my throbbing center. His fingers start to move against me, caressing me through my panties as Anton leans over to take one of Cherie’s stiff pink nipples into his mouth.

“Are you getting wet watching them?” Knox growls in my ear.

“Yes,” I admit on a stilted sigh.

“That’s how I feel, every time I watch my brother fuck you,” he grits out, pushing the damp cotton of my panties to the side and sinking a finger inside me.

A breathy moan escapes my lips at the intrusion, shame coating my cheeks in a pink blush as I dart a glance toward Anton and Cherie– but the two of them are so caught up in one another that they seemingly haven’t taken notice of what Knox is doing to me while in the same room.

Anton releases his wife’s nipple with a loud pop, bite marks fresh on her breasts as he taps her butt, prompting her to slide off his lap. Sinking to her knees on the floor below him, he unfastens his slacks and shoves them down, his cock springing free. It’s not quite as impressive as my mens’ are, but it’s still long and thick, Cherie licking her lips hungrily as she takes it in a palm and leans her head over his lap.

“Come here, brother,” Knox calls out to Roman, Cherie choking on gasp as Anton

bucks his hips and slams her mouth down over his cock.

I hear the clip of Roman's dress shoes against the tile as he crosses the room from the bar cart, tossing back the vodka in his glass along the way and setting the empty tumbler down on the end table beside the sofa.

"Where would you like his mouth, pet?" Knox murmurs, nipping my ear. While rubbing tortuous circles around my clit with the fingers of one hand, he begins trailing the other over my body.

"Here?" he asks, squeezing my breast through the satin bodice of my gown. I arch my back, my head falling back against his shoulder.

His fingers glide up my collarbone, hand circling my throat. "Or here?" he questions, the pad of his thumb pressing against my pulse point.

My breath catches, pulse racing.

Knox works his way up higher, sweeping his thumb against my lower lip before pressing it into my mouth. "Or maybe here?" he asks as I wrap my lips around his digit and suck on it instinctively, the frenetic energy from his touch making me react like a bitch in heat.

He withdraws, thumb drawing a trail of my saliva down my chin, between my breasts, running and over the front of my body, all the way down to the apex of my thighs. "Or perhaps here," he growls, my inner walls clenching around him as he thrusts in a second finger.

A needy whine slips from my lips, unbidden.

Knox glances back up at Roman, emerald eyes twinkling with dark delight. "I think

we have our answer, brother.”

Roman’s lips curve into a sinister grin as he rounds the couch and comes to stand in front of us, wasting no time in getting to his knees and rucking my dress up. Knox hooks my thighs over his knees and wrenches my legs further apart, spreading me wide to grant his brother access to devour me.

The delicate lace of my panties tears away as Roman rips them from my body, his warm breath fanning my mound as he leans in, spreading me with his fingers.

I belatedly realize that Cherie and Anton are still going at it across the room, but when I look up, they’re both still lost in each other, Roman’s broad form blocking their view of my intimate parts.

An unfiltered moan rattles from my throat as his broad tongue licks into me, my muscles tensing as I instinctively attempt to snap my legs closed, but am met with the resistance of Knox’s firm grip on my thighs. Roman licks and sucks my pussy, pumping a finger inside me, while Knox slides his hands up my body to pay equal attention to my breasts.

My head lolls back against Knox’s shoulder, eyes slipping shut as I sink into the sensations of the twins working in tandem to bring me to climax. Then a slapping sound registers, and I crack an eye open to see Cherie’s cosmetically perfect tits bouncing in Antons face as she rides his dick like a champion equestrian. They wasted no time getting to the main attraction .

It seems my men have the same intentions. Roman pushes up to his feet and lifts me away from Knox, claiming my mouth while his brother undresses. Then he turns me around and lowers me to straddle his twin’s lap, positioning me right over his waiting cock.

Roman's hands grasp my shoulders, urging me to sink down on his brother's thick length. I gasp at the stretch, my palms splaying against his chest as I start riding him, glancing over my shoulder at Cherie and trying to match my rhythm with hers.

Knox might've been onto something with this voyeurism thing . I'm wound up tight, heat coursing through my veins, pooling in my core.

The familiar rustle of fabric sounds as Roman undresses, then steps closer, stroking my hair down my back. "You look incredible riding my brother's cock like that, wife ," he rasps, a shiver racing up my spine as I hear the pop of a cap, followed by the sensation of lube being dribbled over my back hole. He spreads it around with a finger, teasing the rim before working his digit in.

I moan at the stretch, inner walls spasming at the anticipation for what's to come.

"Give her more," Knox groans, his cock thickening inside me. "The way her cunt grips me when you do that feels so fucking good."

Roman complies, my body tensing under the pressure while I shift my gaze toward my friend and her husband. Anton has flipped Cherie around to ride him reverse cowgirl, both of their gazes fixed on their reflection in the glass french doors. He palms her tits, proudly displaying his wife's body for all of us to admire. My heart skips a beat as he darts a glance in our direction.

I'm not sure which turns me on more— watching, or being watched. I make a mental note to explore that kink later, though Anton isn't getting nearly as much of an eyeful of me as we are of his wife. I haven't missed how the twins have been subtly blocking his view of me since this started. They're not showing me off, they're demonstrating their complete and utter possession over me.

Roman unfastens his slacks and the couch dips as he rests a knee on the cushion,

positioning himself behind me. I feel the pressure against my back hole as he starts to push forward, gulping in air as he starts easing inside. The pain is exquisite; the pleasure euphoric.

Knox slows down his movements until his brother's fully seated in my ass, then the two of them bracket my body, rutting into me with controlled tandem snaps of their hips until I can no longer discern where one of us begins and the other ends. We move as one, chasing the rapture of release.

I'm not sure if it's the thrill of being in the same room with Cherie and Anton or just the sheer exhaustion of the evening we've had, but my climax slams into me like a rogue freight train, body clenching as I cry out. I come harder than I ever have in my life, aftershocks of pleasure coursing through me like a live wire as I clench around my men, the two of them still pumping strong inside me, chasing their own releases.

Darkness tinges my peripheral vision, quickly spreading in from the edges until a veil of black hangs over everything. I don't resist the shadows. There's not a single ounce of hesitation as I give myself over to them, once again succumbing to the dark.

The air is crisp with a renewed sense of energy, birds chirping from the trees of the nearby forest as I walk the manor grounds with Nox and Vesper trotting along at my heels. Spring is finally here. Bright yellow daffodils are starting to bloom in the garden, the crocuses coming to bud. The fragile skeletons of the last dead leaves from autumn blow away on the breeze as nature breathes new life into the estate, clearing the way for something new.

I've gotten in the habit of taking my coffee out here each morning, as the weather allows, and there's a sense of freedom in reclaiming control over even the most mundane of my routines. I've altered many of them in the months since ending my father and fully embracing my new life as Mrs. Volkov.

My crowning achievement has been mastering a perfect cup of drip coffee. It took months to get it to taste half as good as Clara's, but the skill was born from necessity after she left the estate to go work for Magnus instead. The twins still generously fund her husband's medical care, and I can't say I miss having her around. There was no love lost between the two of us.

Clara's departure allowed for the procurement of new staff, and a few members of my father's household staff happily accepted the opportunity to come work at the manor. Having them around has livened up the ghoulish ambiance around here, and I've found it comforting to regain some semblance of family; some connection to the good parts of my life before I came here. I've left all the bad in the past. I thought guilt and remorse would eventually creep in and I'd regret my role in my father's execution, but even months later, they haven't and I don't.

Most days, I don't think about him at all.

The gentle rustle of the boxwood leaves greets me as I breeze past the hedge maze, heat licking up my spine as I recall the night Knox offered to guide me through the labyrinth to the end. Instead, he chased me into Roman's waiting arms, both of them taking me at the center of the maze until I came so hard that I blacked out. I think I already knew it'd end like that the moment he suggested we embark on a trek through the winding shrubbery. Knox does love his games, after all.

I pause in my steps as I reach the edge of the cemetery, dragging a deep breath into my lungs before continuing on and turning down the last row of graves. Coming to a stop at the freshest one on the end, I swallow past the lump in my throat, Nox growling protectively at my side as he picks up on my discomfort at being here.

A lot of that night is still a blur for me. My adrenaline was pumping so hard that I barely remember the act itself, returning to the party to drink and dance, followed by the twins fucking me into oblivion. I don't know who had the unfortunate task of cleaning up my mess, but my father's blood was scrubbed from the stones and his body buried deep by the time I went down there to check the following afternoon. I never asked; I was just relieved that it was finally over.

There's no headstone marking my father's final resting place, but Alina's grave has one now. When the twins confirmed that it was her buried in that plot, I insisted on it, feeling like she deserved at least that much. I never knew Alina, but I still feel connected to her in some way, like we're kindred spirits. I hope she was able to find the same peace I have.

"Wife !" I hear Roman call out from somewhere in the distance.

A smile comes to my lips, heat tingling beneath the surface of my skin at the commanding rumble in his tone. Turning away from my father's unmarked grave, I stride back down the row, making my way out of the cemetery and toward the manor.

When I don't see my husband waiting out front, I decide to head around back, finding the french doors to the study pulled wide. Roman is standing at the threshold with his arms folded over his chest, looking as demanding and impatient as ever. He barks out a command to the dogs in Russian, prompting them to dart past me to greet their master, while I trail behind, taking my sweet time.

Vesper and Nox come to heel at his feet, but unlike his champion show dogs, I'm not so easily trained. I stroll up to him at a relaxed pace only to have him yank me in as soon as I'm within reach, pulling my body flush against his.

"I thought you'd run off," he grumbles, fingers flexing as he tightens his grip around my hips possessively.

"It has been a while since either of you chased me," I tease, popping my foot out behind me. "But I wouldn't risk these boots out here for that."

I don't care how good the thrill of the chase is, these suede booties are way too cute to sacrifice.

A low chuckle rumbles in his chest. "Have we not proven that we'll replace anything of yours that's been ruined in the name of pleasure?"

Fair point. While our rough play has destroyed more designer clothes than I care to admit, replacements always appear the following day, both in black and red. It's strange to have the twins dote on me as they do, especially after how our marriage began, but I can't find it in me to complain. Sometimes I still find it jarring how they can go from brutal to caring, slipping from one skin to another like Jekyll and Hyde, yet there's a thrill in the way they always keep me on my toes, never allowing me to slip into the boredom of complacency.

Dare I say I've come to like it here?

I'm no longer banned from any rooms of the manor, but both of my men spend most nights in mine. Roman typically comes to bed with me, Knox slipping in later through the passage in the wall to join us. Sometimes he lurks in the shadows, and his voyeurism kink has definitely rubbed off on me, because I've learned that I love when one of them sits back and watches almost as much as when they both participate. Knowing Knox is hiding in the shadows while his brother fucks me adds another layer of exhilaration to the experience that always results in me coming even harder, succumbing to the darkness within myself.

Roman nips at my ear, pulling me back out of my quiet reflection. "Are you still planning on going into the city tomorrow to meet Cherie for lunch?" he asks.

"Yes, why?" I respond as I tilt my head, granting him access to trail his lips down my neck.

"I'll ride with you, take care of some business while you're there," he mutters nonchalantly, his hand slipping beneath the hem of my sweater.

"Roman," I sigh, wriggling out of his grasp and taking a step backwards to put some distance between us.

"What?" he asks, feigning innocence; as if he isn't intent on wielding sex as a weapon to make me more pliable to his demands.

"I don't need one of you to come with me every time I leave the estate," I grumble, folding my arms over my chest. "I told you I'll always come back."

"I just don't like the idea of you being away from me, unprotected," he grits out.

"Uh huh," I scoff, rolling my eyes.

Roman stares me down, the muscle in his tightly-clenched jaw ticking. "Fine, I'll

send Niko with you, then.”

I heave a sigh, dropping my arms to my sides and shaking my head. “If someone has to come, I’d rather it be you or Knox,” I say, knowing that continuing to argue this point with him is an exercise in futility. Roman is a control freak.

“Then it’s settled,” he nods in satisfaction, a smirk coming to his lips. “We’ll leave here at ten.”

A small puff of air escapes me, brow furrowing as it dawns that I just allowed myself to be played.

Damn him.

“Ah, you found her,” Knox remarks as he strides into the study from the hall, bypassing his brother and snatching me up in his arms. “Where have you been, pet?” he murmurs as he nuzzles into my neck, scraping his teeth over my pulse point.

“Just out for my morning walk with the dogs,” I reply, my voice strained as a flood of heat rushes to my core in response to his rough handling, making me squirm against him. “Shouldn’t you boys be working?”

“Sorrentino rescheduled our conference call, so it turns out we’ve got the morning off,” Knox states, loosening his grip on me and stepping back to stand at his brother’s side.

“Oh yeah?” I ask, pulse kicking up a notch. “What are you going to do with it?”

His lips curve into a menacing grin and I immediately know what he has in mind, my heart thumping harder against my ribs.

“Shall we play a game, pet?” Knox drawls, arching a devious brow.

My eyes bounce between my men, standing side by side and eating me up with their matching predatory gazes. Their arms are folded at their chests, twin smirks tugging at their lips.

“You know you want to, wife,” Roman coaxes as the two of them advance on me in tandem, their hands gripping my body, mouths landing on either side of my neck.

My head falls back on a breathy moan as Knox’s lips trail up to my ear, his warm breath tickling my hair.

“Run ,” he whispers.

THE END